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MRS. GERALD'S NIECE.

BY

LADY GEORGIANA FULLERTON,

AUTHOR OF "TOO STRANGE NOT TO BE TRUE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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MRS. GERALD'S NIECE.

CHAPTER X.

THREE days had elapsed since the visit of the Lortons, and since then no one had called at the Villa Hendon. Edgar was getting gradually worse. He was evidently very ill, and Ita began to feel that sudden terror of encountering such a trial, far from home and friends, which often abroad takes young people by surprise. They have not pictured it to themselves till it has actually come upon them.

Edgar was not much disposed at any time to see a physician; and an Italian one especially she knew he would not hear of. He had been always more or less delicate, but,

since she had known him, never really ill. She felt perplexed at her loneliness. His disinclination to cultivate the acquaintance of her Mentonese friends had reduced her intercourse with them to the exchange of a few formal visits, and among the English visitors, of which the number was comparatively small at that time, she only knew the Nilsons and Mr. Neville. She was not sorry when after going in and out of her husband's room all the morning, and feeling every hour more restless and anxious, she saw from the window where she was standing in a listless manner gazing absently on the sea, and wondering whence help would come to her, Mrs. Nilson approaching the gate, and then walking into the garden. She hastened to the drawing-room, and rang the bell at once to tell the servant to show her in. "It is very kind of you to call," she said, going to meet her; "I am very glad to see you. Mr. Derwent is very unwell indeed; what ought I to do about a doctor? Lady Emily had always her own with her, and so I know nothing about the physicians here."

Mrs. Nilson's calm, placid face contrasted

in a remarkable manner with Ita's agitated countenance. She smiled, and said, "We are all homœopaths, dear Mrs. Derwent. So we have no experience about the allopathic physicians. Dr. Mandrossi is reckoned the best here, I believe; but if you will allow me I will prescribe for Mr. Derwent. I always doctor myself, Mr. Nilson, and the children. We have at home a homœopathic medicine-chest and Dr. Bell's book."

Poor Ita! could she even have made sure of Edgar's consent, she would have dreaded the idea of entrusting him to Mrs. Nilson's management. Without expressly refusing the offer, she said, "I suppose Doctor Mandrossi would want to bleed him?"

"Certainly he would."

"But that is despairing, for he is the sort of person that ought never to be bled!"

"You had better try some aconite and mercury, but I should like first to feel his pulse."

Ita said that if Mrs. Nilson would be so kind as to wait a moment, she would go and see if her husband was awake. He had not

slept for three nights, but sometimes dozed off in the day for a while. "Dearest love," she said, going up to his bed, "as the sal-volatile and camphor have done you no good, I am sure we ought to send for a doctor."

"My darling, I will not say as old Mrs. Sydney used to do, that I would sooner die than be bled, but as I am sure I should die if they bled me, it is useless to see a man whose only idea of curing me would be to produce his lancet."

"Then would you mind taking some homœopathic globules. Mrs. Nilson is here, and she says she knows about them, and doctors all her own family."

Edgar smiled, and said, "Dear love, spare me Mrs. Nilson and her globules."

Poor Ita did not feel inclined to smile. "But, Edgar, you really must do something; you are not at all well." She saw he was very ill. His hand was burning, and his breathing oppressed. "Do, darling, let me send for Dr. Mandrossi, and I shall tell him you must not be bled."

"No, my love; get Mrs. Nilson to lend

you her globules and her book, and physic me yourself."

This was a bright idea, and Ita thought she would try. So she went back to the drawing-room and said, "You know, dear Mrs. Nilson, that men when they are ill are not very manageable, and though my husband thinks it very kind of you to have offered to prescribe for him, he does not feel well enough to see a stranger. I mean . . . ."

"I know what you mean," Mrs. Nilson said, with a kind smile. "But what is to be done, will he see Doctor Mandrossi ?"

"Oh no, he will not hear of that; I was thinking that if you could lend me your homœopathic book, we could see perhaps what he ought to take, and you would give it me."

"Certainly. I will send the book to you directly, and the medicine-chest with it."

"But I should like to consult with you as to the quantities."

"I will bring it you myself."

"How kind you are," Ita said, with tears in her eyes, "you are such a comfort to me."

"I hope you seek comfort, dear Madam, where only it can be truly found."

"I try," Ita answered, the tears running down her cheeks.

Mrs. Nilson, who was a very gentle person, with that peculiar placid manner and subdued voice which belong to good people of the Evangelical school, took her hand and said, "You do not rely, I hope, on your own efforts?"

"Oh no. God alone can help me to bear this great trial."

"You have, I hope, found the truth as it is in Jesus?" Mrs. Nilson asked, as she looked wistfully into the young face which in sorrow, as in joy, never failed to interest those who watched its expression.

"Found the truth!" Ita thought. "No, she could not say she had yet found the answer to the great question, 'What and where is truth?'" But she was little inclined to argue at that moment, and so she only said, "I hope I love our Blessed Lord, and I wish and try to do his will."

Mrs. Nilson sighed. The reply did not quite satisfy her; but she, too, felt that that

was not the time for discussion; so pressing Ita's hand, she said she would go home at once and soon return with the book and the globules.

Ita went back to her husband's room, and sat down by his bedside. He complained of great soreness in the chest, and of a sharp pain in his side. There was a painful look of excitement in his eyes, and a flush on his cheeks, which betokened increasing fever. She felt dreadfully helpless, and could only go backwards and forwards from the bed to the window, eagerly watching for Mrs. Nilson's return, and speaking little words of endearment to Edgar, smiling about the globules, and saying she was sure they would do him good. He tried to smile too, but his sufferings were great, and to speak was beginning to be an effort. He asked Ita for a little crucifix he always carried about with him. She brought it, and then, hearing the door-bell ring, went to meet Mrs. Nilson.

"The fever is increasing," she said; "his mouth is so parched that he can hardly speak. His hands are burning, and his

breathing seems to me very short. I am sure it is an inflammation of the lungs."

"You must give him some aconite."

It was well that there was some one with a steadier hand than poor Ita's to shake the globules out of the bottle and count them.

"There, take these three, dear Madam, to your dear patient, and let us hope they will do him good; and as we must think of the poor soul as well as the body, you might, perhaps, ask him if Mr. Nilson might come and read to him. He would reckon it a privilege to minister to a brother clergyman."

Ita felt convinced that Mr. Nilson's ministrations would not be acceptable to Edgar; but she said she would ask him, and she carried away the medicine. In a few minutes she came back and said, "He has taken them; he is much obliged to you, but he will not trouble Mr. Nilson to come to him at present. If he can attend to reading, I can read to him, you know."

When she had given Edgar the message, he had shaken his head, and, taking up the

crucifix, he whispered to her, "I would rather die, if it is God's will I should do so, with this in my hand, than with any human aid I can have here. If I should get worse I may indeed wish to receive the Sacrament. In that case I will let Mr. Nilson know. You can read to me later a few verses of the Psalms."

"I hope," Mrs. Nilson said, "that the aconite will produce sleep, as well as reduce the fever. I should advise you to darken the room, and to leave Mr. Derwent quite quiet for a while. I will remain here if I can be of any use."

Ita said she would be glad if she would, and, leaving the door of the bed-room open, she came back and sat down by her. It was a relief not to be alone during those hours of anxiety. She hid her face in her hands, and remained a moment silent.

"My dear Madam," Mrs. Nilson said, "this is indeed a time when you must feel the vanity of all human helps."

"No, indeed," Ita answered; "I think God is very good in sending us human helps. Your coming to-day, for instance, has been a

great support to me. I should have gone distracted if I had been quite alone."

"But what I meant is, that at such moments you must, I think, realize that no creature can assist you; that you must go to God alone and pray only to Him, not like the poor deluded Papists, who kneel before a crucifix, or cry to the Virgin Mary in their troubles."

Ita had been feeling all that day the paralyzing effect on the mind of an intense anxiety, complicated by perplexity how to act. The power of praying seemed for the time to have forsaken her. The heavy weight on her heart seemed to keep it from rising to God. Thoughts and words were both wanting. She could only plod on with a sense of unspeakable misery, and murmur, as she looked at a picture of the Blessed Virgin at the foot of the Cross, which was in her room, "Jesus, mercy! Mary, pray for me!" She tried to read, but could not fix her attention. The little act of kissing a Cross she always wore was, however, a tacit prayer. She could offer that up when all other effort was impossible. "It is a time," she said, in

answer to Mrs. Nilson's question, "when nothing seems a help but simply clinging to the Cross."

"The Cross, not the Crucifix," ejaculated Mrs. Nilson.

"What is the Cross if our Lord is not upon it," Ita exclaimed. "Oh, I envy the poor peasants here their simple faith. It is dreadful to come suddenly on such a dark hour as this without knowing . . . ." She stopped short; she was beginning to think aloud.

From where she was sitting, she could see Edgar. He seemed asleep; she went on tiptoe to see. Yes, he was dozing. She came back and told Mrs. Nilson that the aconite was taking effect. "Perhaps—perhaps he will be much better in a few hours," she exclaimed, with a sudden burst of hope.

"My dear Mrs. Derwent," Mrs. Nilson whispered, "I am so distressed at what you said just now. Allow me to improve the opportunity, which may not recur again, of asking you whether I am right in fearing that, although belonging to our pure Reformed Protestant Church, you hold some

of the most grievous errors of Popery. Did you really mean that you envy the poor ignorant Papists ?"

"Yes, I do, because they know what they believe, and we . . . I, at least, do not."

"Oh! my dear Madam! how can you say so? Then it is evident that you have never found Jesus. You have never seized on his merits; never felt certain of your salvation through the atonement. You do not understand what it is to be justified by faith only, the glorious doctrine which Luther and all the Reformers preached."

"I know what Luther thought himself of the Reformation. A clergyman of our Church wrote down one day for me, what he called the Reformers' opinions of the Reformation. I copied it into this book."

Ita opened a drawer, and opening a Letts's diary, which she carried about with her, showed Mrs. Nilson the following passages :

"'The world grows worse daily. It is evident that men are far more vindictive, more covetous, more destitute of all mercy, more immodest and unruly, and far worse

than they were under the Papacy.'—*Luther, Sermon*, in Postill Evang. App., vol. i. Jena, 1600. Advent.

"'Formerly, when we were led astray by the Pope, men readily followed good works; but now all their aim is to get everything for themselves, by extortion, plunder, theft, falsehood, and usury.'—*Luther, Sermon.* 26 Dom. Post Trin.

"'All the waters of the Elbe would not yield me tears sufficient to weep for the miseries caused by the Reformation.'—*Melancthon, Epist.*, lib. iv., Ep. 100."*

Mrs. Nilson sighed deeply. "The opinions of men," she said, "were little to the purpose. Read the Bible, Mrs. Derwent, read it with prayer, and then you will know what to believe, and you will be made free from the bondage of the law."

"We read the Bible every day, Edgar and I," Ita answered; "and we first say a prayer that we may understand it rightly."

"That, dear Madam, may be only a for-

* See "Innovations," a lecture delivered in the Assembly Rooms, Liverpool, April 23rd, 1868, by the Rev. R. F. Littledale, priest of the Church of England.

mal practice. The letter killeth, it is the spirit that gives life. It is impossible that anybody can read the Bible with a humble and devout spirit, and not come to a saving knowledge of the truth. The divine simplicity of the Gospel speaks for itself. Will you —will you read and pray till the light shines upon you ?"

Ita was touched by the real earnestness of Mrs. Nilson's manner. She sighed, and said, "I could almost envy you also the firmness of your conviction—that your belief is the true one."

"You may attain to it, my dear young friend."

Ita shook her head, and replied, "There are truths, or rather duties, about which I do not yet see my way clearly. But I, too, have some convictions which I can never part with, and would rather die than lose."

Too harassed to carry on the conversation, she went again to the bed-room, whither her eyes had been continually wandering. Edgar was getting restless again. He awoke, and asked for water.

"Ought I to try and get him to take some nourishment?" she asked, coming back to the drawing-room.

"Some arrowroot, I should think, could do him no harm," Mrs. Nilson answered. "The only difficulty is that some fevers ought to be fed, and others starved."

What was Ita to do? She felt almost distracted. Edgar was beginning to be light-headed. His answers had not been quite coherent the last time she had spoken to him. Her transient hope, that the globules would work a cure, was passing away. By Mrs. Nilson's advice, she gave him, however, some more aconite, and made out from the book, that six hours afterwards something else might be administered with advantage.

"But in six hours he may be much worse," she said.

Antonia came in just then, and told her that Mr. Neville had called. She said she should like to see him, and informed Mrs. Nilson he was coming upstairs. If anything could have ruffled the mild placidity of that good woman's countenance, it would have been that announcement. She took off

her spectacles, and moved to a chair near the window.

On second thoughts, Ita thought she would go and meet Mr. Neville on the stairs, and speak to him in the dining-room. She told Antonia to sit in her husband's room, and fetch her if he called.

"How is Mr. Derwent?" Mr. Neville asked, as he met her.

She did not answer, but led the way into the dining-room. When they were there, she said, "I am afraid he is very ill, and I am almost out of my mind with perplexity, as to what I ought to do."

"About what?" he anxiously asked.

"About seeing an Italian doctor or not. Either way, I shall reproach myself. Mr. Neville, what do you advise me to do?"

"I suppose you are afraid of their mode of treatment?"

"Yes—that terrible bleeding."

"What do you think is the matter with Mr. Derwent?"

"I think it is inflammation of the lungs. I have been giving him aconite globules, which Mrs. Nilson recommended. She is

upstairs, but he would not see her. Now I fancy that he is not quite himself. It seemed to me, just now, that his mind wandered. I should like you to come into his room for a minute, only she would think . . . ."

"I can wait till she goes. I have nothing else to do."

"Thank you. I should be very glad, because, if we send for the doctor, you can speak to him for me about not bleeding him."

"Go, and do not think of me till you want me. I will sit here and say my office."

Ita thanked him again and went upstairs. She found Mrs. Nilson and Antonia whispering at the bed-room door. The former came to meet her.

"Antonia says that it is dreadful you do not see a doctor. She thinks he is getting worse. I dare say it is no such thing. These sort of people are so easily alarmed. Do not look so frightened, dear Madam; but I really think the case is beyond our management, and that you had perhaps better send for Dr. Mandrossi. I am afraid I must go home now. Shall I tell them as I go down to fetch him?"

"Yes, if you please. Thank you so much for all your kindness."

"Shall I come and spend the night with you?"

"A thousand thanks; but Antonia and I can manage quite well, for this night, at any rate."

When Mrs. Nilson was gone, Ita went to tell Mr. Neville that she had sent for the doctor.

"I cannot tell you how it frightens me," she said, "after he so positively objected to it."

"I think you have done quite right."

"But if he comes and says there is danger, and he must bleed him, what *am* I to do if he says he will die without it?"

Mr. Neville did not answer for a moment.

"Advise me," she said, with the impatience of intense anxiety. He had the habit of raising his heart to God before giving advice, and in this case he particularly felt the need of prayer. It would have been cruel to refuse the counsel she asked, but to give it was assuming a kind of responsibility,

"My advice to you is this," he said; "if I were you, I would tell Dr. Mandrossi, who

is, I have heard, a good and sensible man, how completely the practice of bleeding is given up in England, and that the physicians who have long known your husband's constitution, have particularly warned him against losing blood. If, when he hears this, he still persists that it is absolutely necessary to bleed him, I should say you must submit. I am supposing that Mr. Derwent is not in a state to decide the question himself. We cannot do more than our best. We must ask our good and merciful God to direct us in a decision of this kind, and then act in the simplest manner, according to the circumstances in which we are placed, and which He has ordained. Then whatever the consequences may be, we shall be able to bear them."

These words quieted a little Ita's nervous agitation. "You have done me good," she said, "and now will you speak to the doctor when he comes, and then bring him upstairs?"

"Certainly."

Ita turned back as she was leaving the room. "Will you pray for me; I cannot pray

myself. There seems a dark cloud between my soul and God. I scarcely know what religion I belong to. All is doubt and confusion. I can hardly utter a prayer."

"Try while you hold that little Cross in your hand . . . ."

"Oh yes, that is the only thing that helps me 'at all!'"

"Well, but try and say 'Passion of Jesus, strengthen me,' just those five words. Will you?"

"Yes; and now I will go and wait in his room."

Edgar had been much more ill for the last two or three days than either he or his wife had any idea of, and that evening he grew so much worse that, when the doctor came, he said he was in great danger. There was high fever and severe inflammation of the lungs. He said he would certainly, under the circumstances, have bled any ordinary patient, and that if, in twelve hours, an improvement did not take place, he should feel himself in duty bound to resort to it as the last chance of saving him. But he consented to try, first, the effect of other remedies, and

left all the necessary directions for the night. Mr. Neville stayed in the next room, and now and then she came to tell him how Edgar seemed. He was very agitated, almost delirious for some hours, but towards morning his breathing improved a little, and he dozed at times.

Towards five o'clock, just as light was dawning in a cloudless sky, Ita came out of the bed-room, and Edmund Neville was struck with the expression in her face. It was quite different from what it had been before. She said to him, "You must be very tired and cold, I am afraid?"

"Not at all," he answered; "do you think he is better?"

"I am not sure. He is sleeping just now. Antonia has just come in, and I will stay here a little while. Mr. Neville, what do you expect? Do you expect he will recover?"

"I hope so, yes; I think I may say I expect it."

"You do not know how dreadful it would be if I were to lose him now."

"I know, I know what misery it would be."

"No, you do not know what would make it so terrible. It would not be because I love him so much, or because, while other people have fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters, I have only him, and that I should be quite alone in the world if he were to die. It is not that I mean . . . ."

"It would be a great, an unspeakable sorrow," Mr. Neville answered. "But one suffering you would be spared, the worst of all—self-reproach. You would not have that torment."

"I should," she said in a voice which startled him. He waited for her to say more. She was hesitating whether she should disclose the thoughts that had been crowding into her mind during the silent hours of that long night.

When the doctor went away, and she remained fully aware that Edgar was in a very dangerous, though not in a hopeless state, she had sat down by his bedside, and looked at him, and thought that perhaps this life, with all its hopes, its joys, and its love, was about to end, and that for both of them in that case there would be nothing real, no-

thing that would signify, but the world to come. The sufferings of thirty, forty, or even seventy years, seemed like nothing by the light of that prevision—nothing to that boundless space beyond these years on which he was, perhaps, about to enter. And at the same time with that light, an irresistible overwhelming consciousness filled her soul, not only that she utterly disbelieved all the illogical, far-fetched shifts and pretences of an unreal Catholicism, but that she had a positive and firm conviction that if there is a true Church and a true religion in the world, it is the Roman Catholic Church, and the Roman Catholic religion.

All the theories that she had tried so hard to accept, all the sophistry of an artificial Church system, all the delusions cherished against the daily evidence of their unreality, melted away like snow in the fiery light of one great, terrible fear. The passionate human affection which had kept her soul captive now took a new direction. It made her look on the question for her beloved one's sake and her own, as if they were both standing on the brink of eternity. Earthly

suffering—even an earthly parting, those terrible spectres which had lately haunted her, lost their terrors in that hour. By Edgar's side, Edgar, who was, perhaps, dying, one thought alone was uppermost. Were they both in earnest? Could they both have stood before the judgment-seat of God and have declared they were sure—sure with the certainty of absolute faith—that the Anglican Church was that Church, or was united in faith with that one Church of which our Lord spoke when he said, "Thou art Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall never prevail against it.'"

Perhaps he might. She looked at the Crucifix lying on his bed near his hand, and she felt that if God recalled him whilst still outside what she now, with a full conviction, believed to be the true Church of Christ, she could hope, she might trust that the error was involuntary, the delusion pardonable. But she? No, never again after that night could she plead ignorance before men or before God. The voice had been heard, the light seen, the veil of the Temple rent in twain,

disclosing the holy of holies to her trembling gaze with awful distinctness. The very foundations of her soul were shaken, but a new power also imparted to it, a strength to welcome suffering, if so be she might win by it on his death-bed, if God so willed it, or for his future life, if it was spared, the blessing contained, now she knew it, in those words: "The true faith."

Never had a greater change taken place in a woman's heart, and yet in one sense nothing was very different. Her love was the same, and her convictions much what they had been before that night—only both had risen higher than the hopes and fears of this world.

After the pause which had followed the utterance of her reply to Mr. Neville's words of comfort, she slowly and resolutely said, "If I had been honest, courageous, true to God and to myself, instead of weak and selfish in my blind love for him, who knows . . . . Oh, Mr. Neville, I can never, never forgive myself if Edgar should die not a Catholic!"

Edmund Neville looked at her with great

surprise and emotion. "Are these feelings new ones?" he asked. "Have you been thinking for some time past differently from your husband?"

Ita burst into tears, and answered, "I have still a weak fear of telling you the truth, of saying what would make him miserable when he is so ill, dying, perhaps. But I know this is wrong. It must never be again with me as it has been. God has shown me this night that He will not be trifled with; that truth, when once seen, must not be resisted; that on my loved one may be visited my cowardly weakness. My greatest anguish, since the doctor said he was in great danger, has been that I hid from him my convictions."

"Then this is no sudden inspiration?"

"It is like a sudden light thrown on a dim, colourless scene. I cannot tell you more at present. I must go back to him. But I am glad I have said this much—that I have secured myself against my own weakness. Whatever happens, whether by God's great mercy my beloved one recovers, or if I lose him . . . . Oh, my God!"—she stopped

a moment, pressing her hand on her heart—"I give you the right—I even wish you to promise, Mr. Neville, that you will remind me of what I have just said to you. There is nothing before me now, either way, but trials so great that nothing could exceed them, except *that* anguish I spoke of just now—the not having told him the truth. If he recovers, and you see me so happy that I might, perhaps, wish to think this had all been a dream, remind me of that anguish. Do not let me delude myself again. You are God's priest, and now you know that I am a Catholic in faith, heart, and desire, never let me deceive him; and pray, oh, pray, if he lives . . . ."

The sound of Antonia's voice calling her startled Ita, who rushed back to the bedroom.

Mr. Neville had sometimes thought she was nearer the Church than her husband, but he had never spoken to her about religion, and was astonished at this sudden disclosure of her feelings.

On the following day, Edgar was a little better. Dr. Mandrossi could not say he was

out of danger, but he thought rather more hopefully of his case. The fever had abated, and he was quite himself again. He did not object to the attendance of the Italian physician, so long as he did not insist on bleeding him. A compromise was agreed upon—leeches applied and also a large blister. The succeeding night was bad, but there was some improvement on the next day.

Meanwhile, Ita nursed him with a heart divided between hope and fear, and a deep consciousness that the careless, joyous phase of her life was over. The future could never be like the past. She was very calm and composed, and when she came out of the sick-room to see Mr. Neville or Mrs. Nilson, who often called to inquire how Edgar was going on, she spoke to neither of them of religion. Her brief replies to the latter's well-meant exhortations to improve the season of affliction, convinced that lady that Mrs. Derwent was in an unconverted state, and her poor sick husband, it was to be feared, in no better condition.

One morning, two or three days after he had begun to improve, Edgar called his wife

to his bed-side, and in a low voice, for the least exertion still brought on violent fits of coughing, and his weakness was very great, he said to her, "I do not know whether to ask to receive the Sacrament or not." A wild, unfounded hope crossed her mind, that perhaps in his illness a change had come over him also, and, with a beating heart, she knelt down by him, anxiously waiting for his next words. "But on the whole," he whispered, "I had rather not. You remember what the Lortons told us?"

Ita then recollected that Lady Emma had said that the year before, when Mr. Nilson was going to administer the Sacrament to a sick person, he had begun by delivering a short discourse, in which he warned those present not to believe in the doctrine of the Real Presence, and to beware of Romish and Puseyite errors on that point.

Edgar looked anxiously into her face, and said, "I could not, you know, endure that sort of thing now. I had better content myself with spiritual communion."

Ita's heart sank within her. The momentary gleam of hope was past. There he

was, still very ill, though better than he had been, and without spiritual consolations, without the help of any ministrations that he would accept, and within his reach were all the blessings the Catholic Church gives to her children, if only he could see it.

"Would you like," she asked, with a faltering voice, "to see Mr. Neville. He comes very often to inquire about you."

"No; I am too ill to see any one," he answered.

"You need not speak to him; but I thought, dearest, he might be, perhaps, a comfort to you as he is a priest."

"No; I am afraid of his speaking about his Church. I will not see him, but thank him for his kindness."

A few more days elapsed, and then all immediate danger was at an end, though Edgar remained so weak that Ita was very anxious as to the effects of this illness on his general health. One morning, after she had given him his breakfast, he asked if there were any letters for him. She tried to persuade him to put off looking at them, but he insisted on her fetching them. He sat

propped up by pillows, his face looking so wan and white, now that the light shone fully into the room, that she was frightened at the alteration in his looks.

"Give me my spectacles," he said, as he broke the seal of one of the letters. He tried to read, but could not discern a word. He laid down the glasses and the letter, and exclaimed, "It is as I feared. I cannot see at all to read. I am all but blind now."

Ita threw her arms round his neck, half-sitting on the bed, and said, "It is only just now, because you are so weak."

He turned his pale face towards her, and answered, "My own darling, I have long been prepared for this. You must not grieve about it," he added, as he felt a hot tear fall on his hand. He did not know all the anguish of the heart against which his head was resting.

"Read those letters," he said.

One of them she saw was from Mr. Roland. By taking them all up at once, and shifting her position, she managed to withdraw it from his sight. She read aloud one from his mother, with very little news or

interest in it; and then opened one from Annie. It began by giving accurate details as to several matters of business connected with the parish, and then went on to describe the various improvements she was making in their house and garden. Glancing down the page, she saw the following passage :—

"Mr. Roland has given up his living. I may as well mention it, as everybody by this time knows it. I would not believe it till it actually happened. Of course they intend to turn Roman Catholics. He is gone to London, and Eliza and the baby also, I do not know where. I believe Lord Carsdale wishes to consult Edgar about the living, whom he shall give it to. There is a nephew of Mr. Pratt, whom he was thinking of—a very good man he says; but he is not of your way of thinking, so I suppose you would not like it."

Ita skipped the whole of this paragraph, and went on with what followed :—

"I do not want you to come back a day sooner than is good for Edgar, but I shall be very glad when you do return. Aunt Gerald gets more and more nervous and fidgety, and

frets at your being so long away. If Mentone is doing Edgar good you must stay there; but I hate the very name of the place.

"Just say in your next letter if Edgar would like the new carpet in his study to be green: two different shades—a light sprig on a dark ground; or would he like blue better? You know I was determined to get rid of that hideous red thing, all covered with ink spots. I have bought a sewing-machine for you, and one for myself."

"Does not she say anything about the Rolands?" Edgar asked.

Ita hesitated.

"Tell me directly," he quickly said; "is it true what the Lortons told us?"

She had no option now but to read to him what Annie had said. She could not keep her voice steady, and as she finished burst into tears.

"It is dreadful," he murmured. "The betrayal of a sacred trust; the abandonment of such great hopes; the misery, the scandal . . . ."

"Oh, dearest Edgar, try not to think of

it just now. You are getting so flushed; you will bring on a fit of coughing."

He was worse all that day. Towards evening he exclaimed, "I cannot understand that Roland should not have written to me. Common good feeling ought to have made him do so."

Then Ita thought it best to say that there were some other letters, and one from him amongst them.

"And why on earth did you keep it back?"

"I want you so much to be quiet."

"Nonsense, my love. Do you think I have thought of anything else all the afternoon?"

"That is just the reason. You will make yourself ill."

"Darling Ita, there is one point on which we must come to an understanding. I am blind, or very near it. You are my eyes—my second self, my sole reliance, my support. Even with the best intentions, you must never deceive me—never keep back anything from me. It would deprive me of a confidence which is everything to me now."

Ita opened Mr. Roland's letter, and, with as steady a voice as she could command, read as follows :—

"My dear Mr. Derwent,—The great kindness I have received at your hands, and my deep and sincere regard for you, impose on me the duty to inform you myself of what I know will grieve you, and put an end, I fear, to our friendly intercourse. I allude to my giving up the living of Bramblemoor with the intention of joining the Roman Catholic Church. It has not been, as you will easily believe, without a long and painful struggle that I have come to this determination. I may say with truth that, in some ways, it would have been easier to me to meet death than to have taken this step. But I think you will so far agree with me that when once a man is convinced that he cannot with a good conscience remain in the Church of England—that when he can no longer believe it to be the Church, or any portion of the visible Catholic Church of Christ—that at the cost of any sacrifice, he is bound to leave it.

"This I am about to do. I will not

speak of the sufferings which this step involves. They are many and acute, but God will help us to bear them. My wife desires her kindest love to Mrs. Derwent. One of the greatest trials of this moment is the separation from such friends as you and Ita have been to us.—Believe me most faithfully yours,

"T. Roland."

Edgar said nothing for a few instants. His compressed lips and the tension of his face showed he was making efforts to keep down emotion. Ita did not venture to make any remark. At last he said, "I wish I had not cared so much for that man! I respected and loved him more than anybody almost; but this act of his separates us altogether. Do not talk to me about them; it is too painful a subject. Give me a pen and paper. Oh, I forgot that I cannot see to write. Write for me—"

"Dear Roland,—I am too ill to write myself. I dictate this to my wife. You forsake the Church of England; our friend-

ship is at an end. I cannot keep up any intercourse with one who insults his spiritual mother and mine, and deserts her in her sorest need. The strongest affection I am capable of feeling could not survive such a blow. Except by chance, we shall not meet again in this world.

"E. DERWENT."

"What are you adding?" Edgar asked, as he observed that Ita was writing on.

"This," she said, looking up: "'Edgar is much better—quite out of danger.'"

"Anything else?"

"Yes; 'God bless you both.'"

Her husband answered nothing. She folded, sealed, and sent the letter.

CHAPTER XI.

It was full three weeks before Edgar could do more than get up for a few hours in the day, and sit by the window during the hours of warmth and sunshine, screened from the glare of the sea by a green curtain. But not even when his strength returned did his eyes improve much. He could not attempt to read or write; Ita did everything for him, and his dependence upon her was complete.

Mr. Neville came sometimes to see him, but they never talked of anything bordering on controversy; even with his wife he spoke less of religion than heretofore. She read to him, and played and sung to while away the time. He was very patient; never complained; but it was a stern sort of patience that seemed to deepen the natural reserve of his character.

He insisted on Ita's going out every day beyond the terrace walk of their garden, where she would have liked to remain within call. He knew that exercise was good for her, and was not sorry to be left sometimes to his own melancholy thoughts.

She always went in the same direction, through the old gateway into the Via Lunga, and then up the steps that lead to the parish church. Every day she prayed there a long time, as close as she could to the altar; in that great Presence which makes a Catholic church different from every other place in the world.

One evening, as she was coming out of San Michele, she saw Mr. Neville advancing towards her. She went to meet him, and they sat down for a moment on the low wall above the Piazza.

"I am glad I have fallen in with you," he said; "for I have just been to wish your husband good-bye. I am going back to England to-morrow. Can I do anything for you?"

"Yes," she said, the colour rising in her cheeks, and her eyes fixed on the ground. "Yes, you can pray for me."

"I do so," he answered, "every day of my life. I have not forgotten the promise you required of me."

"Thank you," she said; "but there is no need of reminding me. What I felt that night I still feel; what I meant then I now mean. It was not a burst of excited feelings, of transient enthusiasm."

"I was afraid it might be. You have quite made up your mind then to act up to your convictions."

"Quite; I have not wavered about it once since the day when Edgar was so ill. There is a passage in Dr. Newman's book, 'Loss and Gain,' which I often think of now. He speaks of the deep peace and serenity of mind of a person who has been received into the Catholic Church, and he says that it is like the stillness which almost sensibly affects the ears when a bell which has been long tolling stops, or when a vessel, after much tossing at sea, finds itself in harbour, and that it throws one back on the memory of one's earliest years; that it is as if one was really beginning life again. But that the happiness of childhood is nothing to it. I already

begin to understand this. Is it not strange, Mr. Neville, that any one can feel as happy as I do since I took that resolution, and yet suffer so terribly?"

"About your husband, you mean?"

"Yes, that part of it is worse than death. I cannot conceive how I can bear it; sometimes the aching of my heart is so acute when I think of the suffering I shall cause him, that I almost expect it will really break."

There was a moment of silence, and then Mr. Neville said, "It is seldom that such peace as you spoke of just now is felt before the final step is taken. Before people are actually received into the Church I have often observed that up to the last moment they suffer very much, and are still full of doubt and agitation. As a rule, peace comes afterwards."

"I suppose God gives me this peace and this joy in believing, because He knows how great my suffering is; and then also, perhaps, because my mind is so entirely made up. I would ask to be instantly received into the Church if it was not that at this moment Edgar is so weak, that any agitation

might bring on a relapse. I have been thinking what I had better do. He depends, you know, so entirely upon me. If, when we are in England, and I have taken the final step, he should think it right . . . . he is very much in earnest . . . . He thinks it, you know, a very wicked thing to leave the Church of England . . . ." She stopped, and then added, conveying without expressing her thought, "Annie would be near him."

Mr. Neville was deeply moved. The words of our Lord came into his mind—"I have not found so great faith not in Israel." There was something very touching in that calm, courageous resolution to do what was right, come what would of it, and the clear appreciation of a terrible, impending trial, in a person of Ita's character, and as yet unsupported by the strength to be found in the Church.

It was impossible to look at her and to have seen and watched her during her husband's illness, and not to have been struck by the feminine tenderness and childlike sweetness of her nature and her intense affection for him. But her resolution was inflexible,

because with the spirit of a martyr, though she might writhe under the agony of giving him pain, and shudder at the thought of being banished from his side, she would not shrink from paying the price she had offered when he was in danger of death, to obtain for him the gift of faith.

"You are a valiant woman," Mr. Neville said, pressing her hand as he rose to take leave of her. "To those whom God calls to make great sacrifices, He gives when they are true to Him more than common courage."

A sweet smile passed over Ita's face as she answered, "I am as weak as water, but too great a coward to dare to trifle with God's mercies. I wonder when and where we shall meet again. Give me your blessing."

Mr. Neville blessed her, and said, "I suppose all you have said to me on this subject is strictly confidential?"

"Yes," she replied. "I should not wish any one to know of it before I can tell Edgar."

Then, after shaking hands, they walked away in different directions.

As Ita was descending the steps again,

and about to turn into the street, she passed a woman walking on crutches, whose appearance attracted her attention. She was dressed in black, and had on a plain white cap. Her face was very pale, but its expression so calm and sweet, that she could not help stopping to look at her. There was something at once serene and melancholy in her large dark grey eyes and gentle-looking mouth. Her hair was quite grey, though she did not seem very old—not more than forty-five or forty-six, apparently. Ita thought she was coming up the steps, and drew back, as if to make room for her, but the lame woman shook her head with a smile, which seemed to imply that she would have liked to have gone that way if she could, and then she walked down the street, and through the archway towards the Via di Brća.

Ita was suddenly possessed with the idea that this might be the woman whom she had heard of from the priest at Colla, who had lost her child in a shipwreck, and whom she had so much wished to see. Edgar's illness had driven the subject in a great measure out of her mind —at any rate, prevented her from making any

inquiries about her. She looked at her watch, and seeing that it was yet more than half an hour before the time when she would be expected at home, she followed the person who had engaged her attention to the Church of the Black Penitents, as the old Franciscan church is now called. She saw her kneeling, with her crutches laid by her side, in an attitude of profound devotion, quite motionless, as if she saw and heard nothing about her. Ita was obliged to come away before she had made the slightest movement. Her whole being seemed absorbed in prayer.

All the evening, even whilst she was reading to her husband, the thought of this woman was running in Ita's head. And the next day, when she went out walking, she stopped at the Abate Giovanni's house, whom she met just coming out.

"Ah, bravo!" he exclaimed, when he saw her. "Then the Signore Derwent is much better, as the Signorina can leave him."

"Yes," she answered, in Italian; "he is much better, and he insists on my taking a walk every day."

"He does right," the Abate answered;

"and now we have got, at last, fine weather again."

After a little more conversation about Edgar's illness, Ita said, "Can you tell me the name of a person dressed in black, with a white cap, who walks on crutches, whom I met yesterday in this street?"

"An elderly woman?"

"Not very old, but with grey hair, and a very nice, pleasing face."

"Oh, yes—*poverina!* Her name is Mariana. She is very poor, very good, and always praying. Some people say she is not quite right *here*," he added, touching his forehead; "but I wish we were all as mad as she is, if we were one-half so good. I do not think she has ever been mad at all; but the loss of her child, and a fright and a blow on the head in an accident at sea, a great many years ago, when she was coming from Florence, where her husband died, made her lose her memory, and she has never quite recovered it since. She wanted to see you, but I told her not to trouble you. She has not been to your house, has she?"

"Oh, no! I never saw her till I noticed her in the street yesterday."

"Ah, I thought not. She is so good and obedient."

"But I should like to know her. Where does she live?"

"Here, in the Via Lunga; the last house but one to the left, near the gateway. Take care how you go down the stairs. It is so dark till you get to the landing-place."

Ita determined to go there at once. She felt a little nervous, but very anxious to talk to Mariana—to examine her features, and to hear as much as she could recollect or tell of the circumstances attending the loss of her child. She might say something that would put it out of the question that she herself could be that child; and Ita could not but feel that this would be a relief, though at the same time she could not have been contented to have put away the idea of such a possibility without having examined into it. She went, therefore, straight to the door the Abate had pointed out, and groped down a very dark staircase.

When she got to the bottom, she called

out, two or three times, "Mariana!" and soon heard the sound of crutches. The door opened, and the lame woman appeared. She smiled as she recognized the lady who had offered to let her pass the evening before, and invited her into her very small, but clean and cheerful room. All the furniture in it consisted of a poor pallet, a chair, and an *alterino*, on which were spread out her little devout treasures. She placed the chair for her visitor, and sat herself on the edge of her wretched bed. Ita made some remark in Mentonese, at which Mariana seemed surprised.

"So, you speak our language," she said. "So much the better, Signorina. But, do you know, I had almost forgotten it when I came back here last year; for so many years I spoke nothing but Italian."

"And where have you been so long away? Are you not a Mentonese?"

"Yes; but I married very young, and went to Florence with my poor husband, and we lived there till a fever carried him off, about two years after we married."

"And then . . . ."

"Then I have been many, many years in a hospital at Genoa, with the good nuns. I was for some time out of my mind. My head was so bad. When I spoke, people said I talked nonsense, and perhaps I did. I am never sure even now whether I am dreaming or remembering, but the good God knows. I am like poor Gian, the dear good idiot boy, who is always in the churches. But people are kinder to me than to him. Everybody is good to me."

"You have had great sorrows?" Ita said, gently taking her hand.

"Truly I have!" Mariana answered, and she looked at the sea in an earnest, wistful manner. "First, I lost my husband. Lorenzo died—he was a good youth. I am sure he is in Paradise! Happy him! poor me! I was coming home with my bambina—the prettiest creature, Signora! The English lady who was in the ship with us used to stroke her cheek, and say, 'Cosi vezzosa!' She did not know much Italian, but she always said that 'Cosi vezzosa!' She had a baby also, but not so fine a child as mine. She was as good a Signora as ever lived,

that English lady. She gave me some of her child's own clothes for my bambina. The night before the accident she herself put a clean night-gown on the creatura . . . ."

Mariana stopped. Her mind was wandering back to the past, and seemed for a moment abstracted.

Ita was looking at her intently, wondering whether some secret instinct would speak to her heart, if by some strange possibility this was her mother. "And what happened that night?" she gently asked.

"Who knows?" Mariana answered. "I had a dream about it once, after I had been a long time in the hospital. When first I was there I was always asking for the bambina, and they told me that if I had ever had one she was drowned in the sea, for that the ship I was in had struck against another in the dark, and that almost everybody had been lost; but I could not remember anything about it. The last thing I recollected was the English lady putting the night-gown on the bambina. But one night as I was lying awake in my bed near the window, looking at the sea—but perhaps I was asleep

and dreaming, I am not sure—I fancied I was standing at the top of a ladder and a great noise going on around me, and people screaming; and then I thought I gave the bambina to somebody who was holding out his arms. It all passed through my mind, just as if it was happening then, and I was very ill again afterwards, for I do not know how long. At last I got better, but I did not wish to leave the hospital, and the sisters were glad to keep me. I helped them to nurse the other patients. They thought I was not quite right in the head, because I forgot things. Not what I had to do in the hospital, but things that had happened before I came there. I could not tell them the name of Lorenzo's father, or they would have written to him. I did not want to come back to Mentone without Lorenzo or the bambina. I liked better to stay with them. They were so good, and there is such a beautiful chapel where I could always go when they did not want me. But when the sisters were sent away I had to leave too.

Ita had been eagerly listening to every word Mariana uttered, and thoughts were

crossing her mind with the rapidity of lightning. Was it Piombo who had received Mariana's child into his arms? Was the scene she had described a sudden return of memory recalling what had really happened, or a mere dream, or a hallucination. As far as she had ever heard it was in a boat drifting at the mercy of the waves, that she had been found lying. The paper at the villa said so, and she remembered sitting on Mr. Hendon's knees, and hearing him say to Lady Emily, "You should have called her Moisina."

"And you used to sit by the side of your poor little baby's cradle and sing her to sleep?" she said to Mariana, thinking this picture might awaken latent recollections, and she was not mistaken.

A faint colour rose in the poor woman's cheek, and she answered, "These poor arms were her only cradle. She never left my bosom till I gave her into those other arms that took her away. I hope she is with God in Paradise. But, O Santissima Madre! if she is on earth, let me see her before I die."

Ita could not restrain her tears, and raised the thin, wan hand she held to her

lips. Still she did not feel what she thought she ought to feel, considering the possibility which she was mentally contemplating.

"How do you live, dear Mariana?" she asked, after a pause. "Who takes care of you?"

"Good souls," she answered, with her sweet smile. "One gives me a penny, another a bit of bread. Shia Teresina bought me this black gown. I can do a little needle-work and earn something that way. I want very little."

"You know the priest at Colla? You went there last summer?"

"Yes; when I came back to Mentone they told me that the English lady who used to live here had adopted a child, who had been found by one Giovanni Piombo, of Spedaletti. I thought, Signora, that perhaps she might be my daughter; but the man was dead, and the lady gone away to her own country. Then this winter people said that the Signorina was here, that she was married, and I wanted to see her. I felt as if I should know at once if she was my Lucia. But Pré Gian said I was not to think of it. That it could never

be proved, and a poor foolish creature like me should not go and trouble a lady with my mad fancies. Pazienza, he is a good, holy man, and he knows best. If I was sure she was my child, I would not say so. I should only look at her as she walked by, and perhaps kiss her hand, as I would any other lady's. If only I could know that the creatura was in Paradise, or a good Christian if she is alive! Jesus and his Holy Mother bless her!"

Ita hesitated whether she should tell her or not that she was Lady Emily's adopted daughter, but she put off, at all events for that day, doing so. "Was it in that accident that you received the injury that has made you lame?" she asked.

"The sisters said so. They thought I must have hurt my hip as well as my head. I was taken out of the water quite insensible."

"Have you any relations here?"

"No; I was an orphan and an only child. I had an uncle, but he is dead. Everybody here thought I was dead, too. And so they did at Florence, I believe. When I came here, they called me the Ghost, and then the Pazzarella."

"And now the Santarella," Ita said, fondly stroking her hand.

Mariana smiled. "That is the worst mistake of all," she said.

Ita glanced round the room to see what would be the most acceptable present she could make to Mariana. It struck her that there was nothing scarcely but a straw mattress on the poor bedstead.

"Do you not want a coverlet and some sheets?" she asked.

"There are other poor creatures that want them more than I do," was the answer.

"But none to whom I should so much like to give them," Ita replied, caressingly.

Mariana drew her to herself and kissed her with that simplicity which belongs to the poorer class in Italy. Ita thought as she returned the embrace how terrible, in many cases, would be the idea of a mother in that rank of life; but there was in Mariana a gentleness and a refinement which prevented that feeling. But at the same time she could not at all realize the possibility of the fact, or experience any of the emotion which the

slightest doubt on the subject she thought ought to produce.

Before going away, she tried to discover the date of the accident, which had been so fatal to the poor woman, and the name of the hospital at Genoa where she had spent so many years. But it was difficult to get any definite answers from her as to those points. She seemed to have forgotten her own age, and the names of almost all the persons she had known. Her mind had retained certain images and recollections, but there was no sequence in her ideas.

"Where have you been to-day, little woman?" Edgar asked when his wife came in.

"To see a poor person," she answered, and then, after a little hesitation, added, "the person I heard of at Colla. I have found her out."

"Well, and what is she like?" he asked with a smile, which showed how little importance he attached to her surmises.

"She is a very nice woman—almost a saint, the Abate Giovanni says, but I do not feel at all as if she could be my mother."

"I should think not, you silly child. Has she not partly lost her memory? I dare say the whole story is an imagination."

"No, I do not think that," Ita answered; and as she was taking off her bonnet, and standing before the glass, she said, half to herself, "I do not think I am at all like her."

Edgar laughed.

"But you know, dearest, there is just a possibility, and I must try and do something for her. I could not be happy without."

Edgar threw his arm round his wife as she leant against his chair, and said, "By all means. But do not get what the French call an *idée fixe* on the subject."

"Oh no, indeed. I really do not feel as much as I fancy I ought to do about it; only I am so sorry for her, and in a peculiar way, because of her having had that sort of sorrow. I am going to ask Antonia to come with me into the lumber-room."

"Is there such a place in the house?"

"Yes; all sorts of things used to be stowed away there. I have not been into it yet. I think I may find there things which we shall never want that I can give to Mariana

—that is her name. May I do what I like about that?"

"Certainly; and let me know, too, if there are any things that you wish to take to England, that we may consider how to send them; for I warn you that I expect soon to be well enough to go home. And I do not want to stay here a day longer than I can help," he added to himself.

This announcement produced a number of conflicting feelings in Ita's heart. Joy that he thought himself getting well; dread of the long journey; fear of what must happen when she returned to England, joined to the desire for it, a desire growing every day more like the thirst of the hart panting after the water-springs.

She made no comments on his remark, but said she would proceed at once to the lumber-room with Antonia. She wanted to find out if there was any spare bedding. Not much to her companion's satisfaction, she seized upon a blanket and a bed quilt, which she said would serve her purpose, and insisted that a pair of sheets should be added to them, and the whole made into a parcel.

There was one large box in a corner of the room, which she proceeded to examine. It contained a variety of the sort of articles that grow out of use in a house in the course of some years. Worn-out table-covers, old cushions, pieces of unfinished canvas-work, faded balls of worsted, sundry copy-books, some of her own old toys, a backgammon-board, a box of ivory chessmen. At the bottom of the case was a rather large parcel, half tied up in brown paper which Ita drew out and began undoing. "Do you know what this is?" she asked Antonia.

"Yes, yes," the old woman said, looking a little embarrassed. "I remember, Miladi ordered me to put that parcel by—at the time when the Signorina was brought here."

"When *I* came here, do you mean?"

"Yes, Signora. She told me it was the clothes the Signorina had on when Il Piombo found her."

Ita's heart beat very fast. She wished to open the parcel alone. So leaving Antonia to make up the one she intended for Mariana, she took the other to her bed-room, where she locked herself in, and then with

trembling fingers cut the string, and unfolded the contents. There were a red shawl with a blue and black border and a child's flannel gown, night-gown, and night-cap. On these she saw the initials *A. D.* It is difficult to describe the emotion with which she looked at these things grown quite yellow with time, and on those letters, which seemed a connecting-link with those to whom she owed her birth. She might never know more than she did then; but there were the initials A. D. They were something to think of, to dream about. Her first impulse was at once to take those things to Mariana and find out if she recognized them. If she did—if they were the clothes her child had on at the time of the accident . . . . There could be no doubt then of her identity; though, indeed, she might only fancy they were the same. Her memory was evidently not to be relied upon. Ita was ashamed and vexed to feel how much she dreaded to discover the truth. She hesitated whether she should, in the first instance, show the clothes and initials to Edgar. But the dinner-bell was ringing; there was no time for it at that moment, and

she was afraid that it would over-excite him to talk about it in the evening. It might prevent his sleeping. There was nothing to be done till the next day; but it was very difficult not to be silent and abstracted. Edgar remarked, once or twice, that she was not attending to what he said, and playfully reproached her for it. He was in better spirits than usual. With the eager longing for change which often follows a severe illness, he was looking forward to their homeward journey. Ita wished him to stay till April, as the doctor advised; but he wanted to go sooner. It was then about the middle of March.

After dinner he asked her to play to him. This was a positive relief. She could think while her hands were running over the keys, or drawing from them sounds more than ordinarily expressive, for the excited feelings which were flushing her cheeks, and making her heart beat, seemed to influence her playing. Thoughts came one after another into her mind in quick succession. She recollected what, at the first moment she had seen the clothes had not

struck her, and that was, that Mariana had said that the English lady, on board the ship with her, had given to her child some of her own baby's clothes. There was an equal chance then of her being one or the other of those two infants. Involuntarily she inclined to the supposition that she was the unknown lady's child. Her fancy conjured up the image of the young mother who used to caress Mariana's baby, and say, "Cosi vezzosa," and she worked herself up into a belief that that must have been her mother. The shawl in which she had been wrapt up had evidently been a valuable one—more valuable than a poor woman could have possessed. After all, that shawl might possibly be identified. The initials A.D. would also be a clue. "A.D.," she repeated to herself two or three times, and then the name of Annie Derwent came into her mind, without, at first, awakening any particular idea.

She had never heard anything about Annie's parents, except that they had been drowned on the coast of Italy; that she was saved, and that Mrs. Gerald had brought her up. She did not even know where the

accident had happened. She thought it was near Nice, where she knew Annie had lived with her aunt when she was a little child. She played on, and thought on; and the initials, and Annie's name, kept running in her head. And then, naturally enough, Holmwood also. Her first acquaintance with it, and with Annie, and then the day they had gone over the house and looked into Mrs. Gerald's room, and at the picture of Annie's mother—its likeness to herself. . . . Mrs. Gerald's violent emotion when she saw her dressed like that picture . . . . her strange capricious behaviour to herself. . . .

"Why do you stop playing?" Edgar asked. "Go on, if you are not tired, darling."

"I shall soon come back," she said, and throwing a shawl over her head, she went out on the terrace, feeling that she must be alone for a moment. That she must pursue this new strange bewildering thought, and put together the evidence that was rushing on her mind. It caused her a strange sensation, that seemed to thrill through her from head to foot. It was such a startling possibility.

It almost seemed wrong to think of it—for if . . . . if she was the real Annie Derwent, she ought to be where Annie was. But it could not be. No; it was impossible. How could she even think of such a thing. And yet it would account so exactly for that likeness and for Mrs. Gerald's manner to her. And then, that Mrs. Dallas writing to the priest at Colla for particulars respecting dates and initials. That might be a feigned name. She remembered that Mrs. Gerald had asked her, before she was married, the name of the village where she had lived when she was a little child, and what town it was near? Then came the remembrance that she had always thought Annie like the girls of Mentone. She had told her so the first day they had met. If there was anything in all this, Annie was perhaps Mariana's daughter. The more she put together these surmises, the greater grew her agitation; for there was the shawl. If Mrs. Gerald saw that shawl, possibly she might know it again. But, perhaps, it ought never to be shown to her. Perhaps she ought never to breathe to any human being that this idea had come into her head. Yes;

she must tell Edgar. And yet it would put him in a difficult position. She did not know if he had ever heard of her likeness to Mrs. Derwent's picture. She should hardly like to tell even him that she had conceived this idea, and was secretly dwelling on it. There were questions she longed to ask him, and indirectly, even that evening, if she managed well, she thought she might lead him to talk of Annie's parents, without giving him any notion of what she was thinking of.

She went back to the pianoforte, and played a little longer. Then after tea was brought in, she took up her work, and sat down by him. She spoke of several things one after another, and at last mentioning Nice, she said, in an apparently careless manner, though her heart was beating fast, and her mouth quivering with nervousness—

"Was it not near Nice that Annie's parents were drowned?"

"No; near the Gulf of Genoa?" he answered.

There was a pause, and then she asked—

"Is Annie like what her father was?"

"I do not remember him well enough to say. I was very young when he died."

"Did you ever see her mother?"

"No; not that I know of."

"Then Annie has not known her parents any more than I have mine?"

"No; not to remember them. She was only a few months old when they were drowned."

"How was she saved?"

"A sailor, I believe, swam with her to the shore. Now, love, will you read the article on the Eastern Liturgies in the 'Christian Remembrancer'—the number the Lortons left here?"

She read, but every minute seemed an hour; she longed intensely for the silence of the night: and when that was come, and she was lying awake restless, but fearing to move lest she should awaken Edgar, she longed as intensely for daylight and for morning; and, when she was up and at breakfast, it seemed as if it would never be over. Edgar was not looking well. It was a pouring wet day, and this always told upon him. He complained of headache, and seemed

disinclined to talk. It was impossible, she felt, to bring forward then a subject which, though he was always kind when she touched upon it, was not an agreeable one. Her unknown birth and parentage were not a trial to him, but any question of a discovery on that point he evidently shrank from. She would have liked to have shown him the things, and drawn his attention to the initials. If he did not make any remark, and did not seem struck with the coincidence, she would say nothing more, and try not to think about it. But he had lain down on the sofa with his eyes closed, and she felt that was not the moment to force upon him this conversation.

Ought she to pay Mariana another visit, and should she show her the clothes? She was not sure if it was prudent, but the impulse was too strong, she could not resist it. When, therefore, her usual hour for going out had arrived, she sallied out in her waterproof cloak, and with a large umbrella, carrying under her arm that strange parcel, which had become to her as a portion of her life, and a boy following her with the larger

one, which contained her presents to Mariana. She felt almost as if she should faint when she reached the bottom of the stairs, and opened her door; but the poor woman's kind smile and gentle greeting quieted her agitation. She sat down by her side, took the bundle from the boy, and sent him away. When she undid it, Mariana said it was too much — the things were too good for a *poverella* like her.

"May God reward you!" she added, fixing her large grey eyes on Ita with a look of grateful affection.

"Were they like Annie's eyes?" Ita asked herself. She was not certain, the expression was so different. There was the same sudden lighting up in them when she smiled, but that is so often seen in Italian faces that it did not tell much. She could not make sure there was any likeness. Something there was in the shape of the face, perhaps, a little alike. At last she took courage, and trying to speak without betraying emotion, she said, "I want you to look at these things which I have brought with me. I want you to tell me if they are like those your poor

little child had on at the time of the accident. Look at that mark."

Mariana's lips quivered; her hand trembled as she took hold of the little thin yellow garment; large tears fell from her eyes upon it.

"This is my bambina's night-gown," she said, pressing it to her heart, "the one the Signora gave to her. Is she alive? Where is she?"

Ita, with flushed cheeks and dimmed eyes, answered, "I do not know, dear Mariana; nor do I know if we can ever find out. Listen to me. I want you to attend very much to what I am going to say."

"May the Blessed Virgin help me to do so," Mariana replied; and then, pressing the night-gown to her lips, she kept exclaiming, "bambina mia! figlia mia! cosi cara—cosi vezzosa!"

Ita almost despaired of fixing her attention.

"Mariana mia," she said, "do you remember the name of the lady who gave this night-gown and her other clothes to your bambina?"

"Oh no! Signora, I remember nothing—and names least of all."

"But you remember these letters," she said, pointing to the initials,

"Yes, yes," Mariana repeated, still kissing the little night-gown.

"Do you remember this shawl?" Ita asked, much agitated, for the answer might have confirmed or destroyed her own surmise.

Mariana looked at it, and shook her head. "No, Signora. No, I do not remember that shawl."

"Was your bambina wrapt up in a shawl when you gave her to the man who took her away?"

Mariana pressed her hand on her forehead. "Perhaps; I cannot tell; my head gets confused when I try to think. I remember a number of people pushing by me, and screaming fearfully. They were trying to get into a boat, and then there was a cry that it was sinking, and they rushed up the ladder, and scrambled back into the ship."

"Did the boat go down?" Ita anxiously asked.

Mariana sighed. "I do not know,

Signora. It all seems to me like a dream. But oh, where did you get this night-gown?"

"It was wrapped up in a parcel with that shawl, and these other things."

"And where did you find the parcel?"

Ita hesitated a little, and then she said, "They belonged, Mariana, to the child the English lady you spoke of adopted—the baby Giovanni Piombo found at sea."

"Then she is my Lucia!" Mariana exclaimed, seizing the night-gown and pressing it to her heart.

"Listen to me," Ita said. "Listen to me quietly, dear Mariana."

"How can I be quiet?" the poor woman exclaimed, with some wildness in her manner. But while Ita was looking at her anxiously, she saw a change come over her face, and heard her murmur, "My good God, I will be quiet. Help me—I am a poor creature. Give me grace to wish for nothing but that Thy holy will should be done;" and then taking Ita's hand between both hers, she said, "Speak now, Signora."

Trying hard herself to command her feelings, Ita began in a slow and as distinct

a way as she could to explain to Mariana that her child and the English lady's child must have both been lost the same night; that both of them must have worn night-gowns marked A. D., but," she added, her voice trembling as she spoke, "this shawl in which was wrapped up the child whom Giovanni Piombo found, seems more likely to have belonged to the English lady than to you."

"Ah, yes!" Mariana exclaimed sadly, "I never could have had such a shawl as that. Then I suppose my Lucia was drowned. The other child I mean? You have never heard of her?"

Ita was silent for a minute, and then she said, "I know nothing about her, but *if*, *if* I were ever to find out that she was alive, and where she was, and *if* she was happy and a great lady—such things have happened sometimes—would you wish me . . . ."

"Oh no, do not speak to her of the poor Mariana; she would not be glad to hear of her. But if you ever find my child, tell me that she is alive and happy, or write to Pré Gian to say so, and if she should come to

Mentone, let me know of it, that I may watch for her and see her pass along the street and see her face before I die. And when I am dead, then you can tell her that there was a poor woman called Mariana, who had lost her daughter Lucia when she was a baby, and who prayed for her, that rich lady, night and day . . . . because the good Jesus had put it into her heart to do so. But if, when you find her, my child is poor and afflicted, and has no one to care for her, then send her to me, my beautiful treasure, and I will beg for her and love her as no one else can do."

Ita knelt down by the side of the poor woman, who possibly was her mother—possibly Annie's mother, at any rate a childless mother and a very forlorn one—and throwing her arms round her neck, tenderly embraced her.

Mariana suddenly asked her, "Are you, Signora, the child the English lady here adopted?"

Ita hesitated an instant, and then said she was.

Mariana did not utter a word, but changed colour.

Ita looked up, and said, "Am I like any one you remember;" her bonnet was thrown back, and her eyes, her soft beautiful eyes were fixed on Mariana.

"You are very like an angel," the poor woman said, "but not like any one else I can think of."

Ita was disappointed.

"Pré Gian said I was not to trouble you with my foolish ideas, or else now I know that you are the Signora at the villa . . . ."

"But Prè Gian did not know I should come and speak to you myself, and show you these things. What did you wish to say?"

"I was thinking that my Lucia had on her little shoulder the mark of an accident, which she met with when she was three months old, and which the doctors said would always remain, a terrible deep cut. If I could see . . . . only . . . . Oh no . . . . forgive me; you know if it was so, no one but you and I would ever know . . . . but I ought not to have asked."

Ita had turned pale. If the mark did exist, however faint the trace might be (and

it might have escaped her notice and that of others) a doubt could hardly remain. But this time she did not hesitate—her gown was opened—her muslin habit shirt removed. "Look," she said to Mariana, her heart beating violently.

Mariana gazed intently on the white ivory shoulder, and then said gently, "It is not there;" and in a moment she added, as if the idea had slowly come into her mind, "then I think you must be the English lady's child."

The colour rushed into Ita's face. "But you do not see in me any likeness to her?"

Mariana paused, looking somewhat bewildered. "I cannot remember her face," she said at last; "I know her voice was very sweet and so is yours, and she was good and so are you." Then, once more, turning to the little night-gown, as if there was a connection between it and her lost child, she asked if she might keep it.

Ita felt grieved. It went to her heart to refuse the request; but she could not part with one of the most important relics of her

infancy. Taking a little cross from her neck, she put it into Mariana's hand, and said, "I must ask you, cara, to accept this instead, and when you look at it, pray for me."

Her heart was very full. She feared Mariana looked fatigued and overwrought. She feared having said too much or too little. Still she did not see how she could have avoided it, except by not speaking to her on the subject at all. Anyhow, she longed to be alone and think over what had passed between them. So, taking a most kind leave of her, she went up the dark stairs, and found on reaching the street that the rain had ceased. There was even a gleam of sunshine.

As she recapitulated, on her way home, the result of Mariana's incomplete recollections, it seemed on the whole, at all events, very improbable that she should be her daughter. The mark on the shoulder might, no doubt, have disappeared, and she might have forgotten the red shawl, or somebody else might have wrapped her up in it; but all the probabilities were on the other side, and that other side, in consequence, assumed in her mind more and more im-

portance. Mariana would hardly have imagined what she had said about the boat, which a number of people had rushed into and then hastily escaped from. The boat supposed to have sunk might have been carried off by the waves, and it was not impossible she might have been accidentally left in it. As she had been found alone in a boat not very far from the spot, it was not an unlikely supposition that it might have been that very one.

How strange it would be, she thought, to go back to Holmwood and to see Mrs. Gerald and Annie again with this idea on her mind, this extraordinary surmise haunting her at every turn. Should she ever have the courage to speak of it to Edgar? Would he wish to pursue the inquiry? And that mark on the shoulder! if Annie should have it! But by this time it would probably be hardly perceptible even if it had ever existed. These doubts were almost more than she would be able to keep to herself, and yet she could hardly fancy mentioning them to her husband. At first sight it seemed such a wild supposition, and there would be so much that would

complicate all their relative positions. What would Mrs. Gerald feel if the suspicion crossed her, and had it perhaps crossed her, and would she ever open upon it to her or any one else?

It was fortunate for Ita that she had been inured from her earliest years to habits of silent reserve. It made it easier for her now to bear the trial of these oppressive secret thoughts.

When she came into the room Edgar said, "There are letters from England—one from Annie: read to me what she says."

Ita glanced anxiously over the closely-written sheet to see if there was anything meant for her alone, and then read aloud the following letter:—

"My dear Ita,—I am still very anxious about Edgar. At one time I was so miserable that I can hardly bear to think of it. Those horrid telegrams frightened me so. Once I almost lost all hope, and did not know what to do. Nobody gave me any comfort. I could not go those days to the Vicarage—I could not bear it. Now I have

got your letter, and know all about it, I feel happier. The last telegram did, indeed, say he was out of danger; but then it left me in the dark as to what his actual state was. I am so afraid about his eyes. It is very bad not to be with him when he is so ill; but he has you. That is my comfort; I am sure you are a very good nurse, only too afraid of contradicting him, I think." (Edgar smiled, and Ita too.) "I want to know what are your plans. If Edgar is well enough to travel, I suppose you will come home soon. How dreadful the doubt about the bleeding must have been! You were very courageous to withstand the doctor. You have more courage than I have—of one sort of courage, at least. I am not so afraid of cows and wasps as you are. Edgar has just the wife I always wanted him to have. I should hate you if you were not such a dear, loving, perfect wife to him. I love you both very, very dearly.

"After I had received your last comforting letter, I went to the Vicarage and began again working in the garden. I am contriving something that will make Edgar's

sitting-room very comfortable, and as you say his eyes are weaker since he has been ill, I am putting green blinds into all the rooms. It would amuse you to see how busy I am. Aunt Gerald has left off teasing me about paying visits and asking people here. I do not want to see anybody. Mrs. Sydney called last week. I told her that Mr. Neville had been very kind whilst Edgar was ill. She seemed very much pleased. She is a nice person, and I daresay Mr. Neville is a good sort of man, but I wish they were not Romanists. I dislike Roman Catholicism more than ever. I think part of Edgar's bad health is owing to fasting and all that sort of thing, and the bad air where he lived in London before he married. I never wish to go to London again, or ever to leave Holmwood. Edgar used to say in former days that I did not care for it enough. He could not say so now. Tell him I dote on every blade of grass in the park, and every cabbage in the kitchen-garden, and that I have taken root here as if I was myself a plant. I was reading the other day some lines of Cowper's. Yes, I sometimes read,

though you would hardly believe it. I like his poems better than anybody else's.

> 'Time was when 'twas enough
> To fill the ambition of a private man,
> That Chatham's language was his mother tongue,
> And Wolf's great name compatriot with his own.'

These lines put such a ridiculous comparison into my head: I thought it was enough to fill the ambition of a woman to have such a place as this, and such a Vicar in her parish as Edgar, not to speak of such a dear little Vicaress as you in the bargain. Dear me! I hope you will both be very happy when this letter reaches you!—Your affectionate cousin,

"Annie Derwent."

"I am sure Edgar must have been dreadfully hurt and grieved about the Rolands. I cannot think of them with any patience. The blow coming, too, just as he was beginning to be ill."

Ita saw this postscript in time to omit it.

Edgar said, "That dear good Annie! It does please me so much to hear of her increasing delight in Holmwood. I sometimes

think that there are blessings we do not sufficiently dwell on. Suppose she had been poor, and you a rich heiress, how impossible it would have been that I should have given her up and married you; and how miserable we might all have been!"

He took his wife's small hand in his and raised it to his lips, saying at the same time, "My own little pearl of the sea!" These were favourite words of his, and they had always sounded like sweetest music in Ita's ears. They showed how he loved her all the more for her nameless birth; how he valued the unknown flower he had treasured in his heart. But now they seemed fraught with a very deep and serious import. However her own secret surmises might pursue the faint light which had dawned on the obscurity of her origin, what he had said a moment before seemed as if it must for ever seal her lips—yes, even to him. "How miserable we might all have been!" The words fixed themselves in her mind. She thought how miserable it might one day be in her power to make them all if a further clue to the mystery was found! She recoiled from the very idea

of such an act. But would it not also be very hard to go through life, shutting up in her own heart a suspicion which might possibly become a conviction. Would it be right never to tell Edgar of it? That was a grave question, and how was she to resolve it, for to no one but him could she whisper it. Yes, a day would soon come when, with entire security and a confidence deeper than that of any human friendship, she could seek light and guidance on that point. But when that day arrived, how would she and Edgar stand in regard to one another? That doubt was casting a dark shade over the whole of her future.

CHAPTER XII.

Edgar Derwent and his wife left Mentone towards the end of April, but did not arrive in England till the beginning of July. Their intention had been to spend only a fortnight on the way, and they had allowed, they thought, sufficient time for rest at different places. This was necessary for Edgar, who was still very weak, and the heat which had suddenly set in had tended to exhaust him. They resolved, in consequence of this premature summer, to cross the Alps, and to go home by Switzerland and the Rhine. They were warned that the first week in May was too early for the passage of the Splugen, but Edgar was bent on seeing that pass, and chose to assume that the year was an exceptional one. They stopped two or three days at Genoa, and Ita looked with a keen interest

on the bay and the sea outside it, trying to picture to herself the scene on the night of the collision, which, twenty-three years ago, had suddenly sent so many human beings into eternity, and amongst them those whom she was beginning secretly to think of as her parents.

She had never found courage to utter a word on that subject to her husband since the day that she had read to him the letter Annie had written after his illness, and heard his comments upon it. She did tell him of the things that she had found in the lumber-room at the villa, and mentioned that the clothes were marked with an A and a D.

"Indeed!" was all he said; and when she asked if he would like to see them, he begged her not to take the trouble of fetching them, in a tone which indicated he did not at all care about it; and, moreover, that the subject was not a particularly agreeable one. To a sensitive nature like hers, it was impossible to force it upon him. Some persons might have done so, and produced the things, and insisted on showing them to him, without waiting for encouragement. But this would

have been simply impossible to Ita. She took refuge in silence, and with a heart feeling somewhat bruised and sore, laid at the bottom of her trunk the little parcel so precious to her, which he had not even thought it worth his while to look at. She did not ascribe this indifference to a want of affection on his part. She believed, and was right in believing, that he loved her deeply and ardently, but it was not in his character to enter into the feelings of others, and therefore without any fault of his own, he often gave pain where he did not intend it.

On another occasion she tried to lead him to speak of Mrs. Gerald. She described how wayward her conduct had always been towards her, and then timidly, and with a beating heart, related the scene which had taken place when Annie had dressed her like Mrs. Derwent's picture. He answered that his aunt's temper had always been rather uncertain, but he was not surprised at her having been annoyed that day, for she never could bear the pictures in her room to be looked at or mentioned. It was thoughtless of Annie, who ought to have known this, to meddle

with them; and then he changed the subject to what interested him much more, viz., an article in the "Guardian" on the use of incense in churches, and the answer to it he intended to write. After these two attempts she kept to herself every thought connected with the new surmise which was almost constantly in her mind.

At Milan they made another halt, and then having engaged a *voiturier*, performed their first day's journey to Chiavenna, the little town on the Italian side of the Alps, where travellers generally sleep before crossing the Splugen. It lies embosomed in a bower of Spanish chesnuts, and a beautiful waterfall dashes down the rocks at a short distance from the inn. They walked there and sat down on a bank near the emerald and purple pool, where the foaming waters lose themselves, watching the spray and enjoying the refreshing sound of the rushing flood.

"Look at that dog-rose!" Ita exclaimed, "is it not beautiful? it seems so fragile and delicate, with its pink flowers almost touching that boisterous torrent! Does it not bend over it as if in love with its fury and its joy.

You remember Coleridge's lines about a waterfall ?"

"Yes," Edgar replied; "and your thought might be turned into a poem, only you must say an eglantine, not a dog-rose."

"True; in this case the common name is not the prettiest. Generally it is so."

"But I cannot admire anything now on *this* side of the Alps," Edgar exclaimed. "I pine for the mountain air; it seems as if a northern breeze would give me new life. I had rather be bathed in clouds than in sunshine just now."

Ita breathed an inaudible sigh; she had been assured that it was imprudent for a delicate person to cross the Alps so early in the year, but it had been impossible to dissuade him from it. He thirsted for the mountain air like a person in a fever for a draught of cold water. He saw that she looked pensive, and to dispel her anxiety said, "When I look at these snowy summits they seem to me the hills whence cometh my help."

Ita glanced at the sunny plain, the smiling villages, the deep blue sky of Italy,

and the awful mountains rose before her like a vision of coming sorrow; but, as usual, she acted by what was with her both an impulse and a principle, "never to give useless pain." It was too late to urge delay, so she smiled and said the beautiful sunset promised well for the next day, and seemed to share his delight at the thought of the morrow. It rose that morrow beautifully clear and bright, and in their open carriage, the drive was delicious to the foot of the mountain, and winding through the umbraged roads perfumed with the blossoms of the Spanish chesnuts, they began the ascent; Edgar, in high spirits, enjoying every step of the way, and she sympathizing as usual with him with real genuine pleasure at first, but soon beginning to feel, with a sinking heart, after three or four hours' ascent, the increasing sharpness of the air, though the intense sunshine still mitigated its temperature.

They walked a little now and then, but when he returned to the carriage, she was always anxious lest he should not be wrapt up enough. Laughingly sometimes, or a little impatiently, he rejected the cloaks she

wished to add to his already warm coat. The dark blue gentians and the lovely rose of the Alps now began to show their bright hues in the midst of the sparkling snow. Higher and higher, endlessly almost, the winding road seemed to lengthen, as they ascended; down far below them were lying the rich masses of foliage they had traversed that morning, and now they entered upon the regions of Alpine solitude. Then the clouds appeared, and gradually invaded the whole sky. Soon the air became so rarefied that Edgar began to cough, and as they turned the last corner before reaching the top of the pass, the weather completely changed—a cold piercing wind coming from the north, blew in their faces with a keenness that made Ita shiver, not with cold, but with fear.

"Cover your face," she exclaimed. "Edgar, cover your eyes, and let down the glasses." They pulled down the front part of the carriage, but through the ill-adjusted framework the wind made its way, and as they stopped at the refuge a wild hurricane was blowing, and snow beginning to fall. The horses were to rest there some time,

and they got out. Through the passage of the rough inn a cutting blast made its way.

Edgar, when he sat down by the fire was looking white and coughing. He tried to talk cheerfully, but he felt as if the wind had gone through him, and when he went to the window to look at the wild scene, the sight of the snow hurt his eyes so much that he was obliged to shield them with his hand. He then consented to wear a shade, which he had rejected before. But when they set out again, and the weather improved a little, and they approached the Via Mala and the sources of the Rhine, he insisted on taking it off, and he would open the carriage. The sun was then shining and the air less cold, but no longer like the balmy breezes of Italy. Now and then through the Alpine gullies a chilling wind came sweeping over the fir-trees or whistled among their branches; and there was more fury and less joy in that sound than in the roar of the torrent. Even the pretty châlets and the green meadows, speckled with cattle and dotted with flowers, though lovely in their way, had none of the

glowing beauty of the fair towns and smiling scenery of the South.

They were too tired to push on that night, and slept at a small village hostelry at the foot of the mountain. A blazing fire of fir-branches greeted their arrival, and a supper of chamois and salmon-trout was soon provided for the tired travellers. But Edgar was too weary, and Ita too anxious, to eat. Before going to bed, he asked for some rose-water to bathe his eyes. He had not done so for several weeks—indeed, they had been so much better, that he had begun to read and write again a little.

"Do they pain you?" she asked.

"They burn like hot coals," he said; "but I dare say it is only the effect of the cold air. They will be better to-morrow."

The next morning he called his wife to his bedside. "My own love," he said, "I cannot see at all."

She trembled from head to foot, but answered, "It is only a cold." And when that day, and the next, and many more days passed, and the darkness settled on his eyes,

and for the time being he was, to all intents and purposes, blind, she tried to cheer him by the words, "It is only a cold; it will not last."

They travelled on through Switzerland, and crossed the lakes of Wallenstadt and Zurich, and passed through scenes of wondrous beauty with something as like despair in their hearts as can be felt by those who, in the midst of deepest sorrow, believe in God, and cling to Him. He could not, and she would not, look at the beauties of earth and sky. He held her hand almost constantly, and she hardly took her eyes off his pale face and sightless eyes. His deep depression, and the efforts he made to fight against it, told on his strength, and he seemed to grow weaker and weaker each day of that long, tedious journey, with its slow progress and long halts.

What an abyss there seemed between their first journey and the present one! Ita could hardly believe she was the same person that had travelled so joyfully by his side six or seven months before. Now, the sky, the trees, the flowers, seemed to insult her

misery! Edgar was very good, very patient, but not generous—no, not generous—for he kept dwelling on her being his only hope, his only comfort, his only support—his eyes, his life, his heart. Sweet words, which might have stilled her anguish, and mixed even a strange joy with her trial, if they had been one in faith—if he had not once uttered that dreadful sentence, that he would separate from her if she became a Catholic. They kept ringing in her ears, giving an ominous and sad meaning to his words of reliance, trust, and endearment. The more she lavished upon him of tenderness and care, the more he reiterated what she felt to be adjurations never to obey the voice of conscience, never to cease to act a lie.

Oh, if she could have been blind instead of him! If she could be the helpless, the dependent one—close for ever her eyes to the light of day, and throw herself on his mercy! Then she would be free to plead her own cause, to claim her right to free action. She would not have feared to be blind if she had been a Catholic, and Edgar would still have cherished her. She could imagine a blessed

life even with that dark veil between her and the light of day. She would still hear the music of the wind, of the running streams, of the joyous birds, and, above all, that of his voice. The perfume of the flowers, the soft air in the summer, his gentle caresses, the delight of hearing him read, and the Church—the Catholic Church—pouring into her heart its treasures of consolation, of hope, and of holy melody; would not all that be happiness—would not that be a light more beautiful than that of day? She prayed ardently—prayed with a passionate desire that she might be blind and he might see, and sometimes almost persuaded herself her prayer would be heard.

As they were approaching Basle, on their way to Strasburg, where they were to embark on the Rhine, an idea suddenly entered her mind like a ray of hope. She had heard of a famous oculist at Heidelberg, Dr. ——, and she asked Edgar to stop there and consult him. He began by refusing. He preferred going straight to London, and seeing an English oculist. But, on the following day, however, as they were in the steamer,

gliding down the broad river, Ita shading his head from the glaring sun, and never speaking of the scenery unless he asked a question about it, he heard her sigh.

"If it would be a comfort to you, dearest," he said, in a low voice, "we will stop at Heidelberg, and see this famous man. I really believe that I am afraid of hearing his opinion. But this is folly; it is better to know the truth, and make up our minds to bear it."

The suspense of the intervening days was difficult to endure. After arriving at Heidelberg, they had to wait some time before an interview with the eminent oculist could be obtained, so great were the demands on his time. At last the day and hour were fixed. On the evening before, Edgar and Ita sat at the window of the hotel, vainly trying to catch a cooling breeze. The weather was prematurely hot for the time of year, and there was thunder in the air. His languor was excessive, and even her powers of exertion seemed to fail. It would have been a relief to be alone sometimes, or to stroll out and go into a church. But she could not bear to

leave him, even for a moment; and if she could have done so, they were no longer in a region of open churches and Catholic altars. No visible token of religion met the eye, and nothing spoke of God on week-days in this Protestant land.

"And if he is to be always as he is now," she mused, "what is to become of us? It was bad enough to glance, even in thought, at the idea of his thrusting her from him when he was comparatively strong and well; but now . . . . Shall I see him led to church by another, and go my own way alone? Who but I could read or write his letters? Who but me could he ever trust? Who but I would work and live for him as a second self?" The thought of Annie crossed her mind, and an emotion of wild jealousy mingled with those heart-rending questions. No mean, common jealousy, but something like despair at the idea that she might be driven from him, and the forsaken Annie minister to his helplessness, and tend him in his grief. Yet she almost clung to it, even while it broke her heart. Anything better than to think of him alone, even though it should be his own

desire. Her lips uttered no sound—no sigh escaped her; but her hands were clasped together with an intensity that betokened the terrible struggle in her heart. She looked at those eyes that could not see her, with an imploring tenderness which no words could have expressed. She thought of the blind persons our Lord had cured. She prayed that Edgar might see, and then she would accept every other trial. After a long silence on both sides, he said, "Ita, come here."

She went and knelt down by his chair, with her head bent on his hand.

"You are crying?" he quietly said.

She kissed his hand without answering.

"Ita, my own," he whispered, "we must accept this trial with resignation, if it should be God's will it should continue."

"Oh, I could, I could!" she exclaimed, "if . . . ."

"If what, love?"

"If I was sure you would never . . . ." She was going to say, "part from me;" but could not utter the words.

Purposely or not, he hastened to say,

"No *ifs*, my darling. We must accept *all* God wills."

"Oh, but He could never will that," she exclaimed, answering her own unspoken thought.

"I hope," Edgar said, "I am resigned to everything He may ordain." Then stopping, as if he had suddenly guessed her meaning, he added, with strong emotion, "Except what I am sure will never happen;" and then drawing her close to himself, he whispered, "to your forsaking me."

She said nothing. What could she say at that moment? But she looked at the dull leaden sky, darkening with a rising storm, and, as if trying to see beyond those heavy clouds, silently breathed the prayer, "Oh, my Lord, let not my trial be greater than I can bear."

And God never does thus try His children. As their day so is their strength. If Edgar and Ita had been doomed to hear the next day a sentence which would have confirmed their worst fears, even as they were situated, even with all the additional bitterness which their mutual position would have

lent to the trial, His upholding arm would have carried them through that terrible ordeal, and given to each what each would have needed. But it turned out otherwise; better than they had almost dared to hope. The next day came, as all days come, whether longed for or dreaded, and the hour arrived which they looked upon as the crisis of their fate. After a long, weary waiting in the outward chamber of the great man's audience-room, they were summoned to it; Edgar's eyes carefully examined; his previous and present state of health minutely inquired into; the circumstances of over-fatigue, recent illness, exhausting heat, and sudden change to piercing cold ascertained, and then the oculist said—

"Well, now, I'll tell you what: use the prescription I shall give you, and go and spend a month at Spa, and take care not to catch cold, and, I'll warrant it, you'll see as well as I do by the time you have finished a course of the waters there. Weakness and a cold, sir—nothing, madam, but weakness and a cold;" and, sitting down, he wrote directions and a prescription.

Ita had gone away to the window. The tears were running down her face like rain—bright great tears full of joy, and beautiful, like the rain-drops after a storm.

They travelled from Heidelberg to Spa with lightened hearts, almost in gay spirits. And it was a happy month they spent in that quaint place, almost the oldest of all watering resorts—that pretty valley amongst the heath and gorse-covered hills, where the air and the water are both like crystal, pure, bright, and sparkling, and strength seems to breathe out of every spring and every bush.

The doctor's previsions were soon justified. Soon Edgar's sight began to return. Soon he was able to walk and to ride; colour returned to his cheeks more even than in the South, and vigour to his frame. When, at the end of five weeks, they embarked at Ostend, and then from the steamer caught sight of the white cliffs of England, he felt happier, as well as in better health, than he had done for years. Ita was deeply thankful; her heart overflowed with gratitude that once again a dark and bitter grief had been spared them. But she measured more fully than ever by the

light of the mercy shown to her the obligations it enforced. The beautiful old French words, "Fais ce que dois advienne qui pourra" seemed stamped on the future, from which an overwhelming trial had passed away, and she felt more than ever bound to redeem the pledge she had given by her husband's bed of sickness, and renewed by his side during those recent long days of anxious misery.

Edgar had a great power of believing everything he wished; and though he had perceived plainly enough that Ita had lost all faith in the Anglican Church since she had been abroad—and, in truth, he was not much surprised at it, considering what she had seen and heard in English chapels on the continent—he made no doubt that, once at home, and surrounded by her old interests and occupations, she would settle down into a good Churchwoman. There was always at the bottom of his heart the feeling that it was impossible she could act independently of him with regard to religion—that she would never make up her mind to do so. He not only loved his wife, but he thoroughly appreciated her. He valued in Ita the

qualities he was deficient in himself. Though in some ways a proud man, though possessed of a great confidence in his own judgment, he was not vain. He was quite aware that Ita excelled him in sweetness of temper and generosity of character. He felt, to his very heart's core, the beauty of her perfect unselfishness. Perhaps he considered this as a peculiarly feminine virtue, but did not admire or love it the less on that account. It was his high estimate of that, her peculiar merit, that made him inwardly exclaim, whenever a misgiving arose in his mind, that she wished to become a Roman Catholic, "She could never be so selfish." How few even of those who think they know what faith is, understand that it is something too real and too sacred to be adopted or renounced at will, and that its requirements must necessarily be absolute! Edgar thought his wife could not be so selfish as to act up to her convictions, and inflict upon him such acute sorrow. Had she been less unselfish he would have known more of her secret sufferings, and more correctly estimated the strength of her convictions.

It was late in the afternoon of a July day that Mrs. Langdon drove to the London Bridge Station, to meet her son and his wife. They all came back together to Lowndes Square, where they were to spend two or three days. Edgar was delighted to be in London again; and though Ita did not share this feeling, and though the red chimney-pots and dingy rows of small houses which present the first aspect of London on that side to travellers from abroad, seemed to her rather depressing, and the noisy streets unattractive, she took care not to betray this impression. She enjoyed her husband's pleasure, and said to his mother, "Does he not look well?"

"Well, yes, pretty well, I think," Mrs. Langdon answered; "but I do not like the look of that green shade over his eyes."

"I can take it off now," Edgar said. "This pleasant London twilight does not overpower a weak sight."

"So you are glad to be in London again," his mother joyfully exclaimed.

"More, more than glad," he replied. "People say 'Life is life in those sunny

climes;' I feel life is life in these dear foggy streets."

"And you, Margaret, are you pleased to come back to England?"

Mrs. Langdon had not got into the habit of calling her daughter-in-law Ita. Whether the unusual name by which she was addressed had failed to catch Mrs. Derwent's ear, or that she wished not to answer the question, did not clearly appear; anyhow, she went on coaxing Mrs. Langdon's little dog, who occupied the fourth place in the carriage, without raising her head. He had taken the instinctive fancy to her which every living creature was apt to do.

"You will stay with us some days, I hope," Mrs. Langdon said to her son, without noticing her daughter-in-law's silence.

"Till Monday, if you like to keep us till then," Edgar answered. "I wish to spend Sunday in London, but we must soon go to Holmwood. Both Mrs. Gerald and Annie are anxiously expecting us."

"Mrs. Gerald is very ill, I hear."

Edgar and Ita both started.

"Have you heard that lately?" he asked.

"About a week ago, Miss Derwent was in town for one day, and called on us. She appeared very uneasy about her aunt's health."

"Perhaps we ought to go at once," Edgar said.

"Oh, dear no. I am sure she is not in any immediate danger. Miss Derwent said so. The doctors think she may live a long time yet. You must not disappoint us by going before Monday. Indeed, we cannot hear of it, and I have accepted an invitation to dinner for you both for Saturday."

"Have you; and pray where?"

"At Lord and Lady Carsdale's. You will meet there your old friend, Mr. Hendon, Margaret."

"Oh, is he in London? I shall be very glad to see him."

"Poor Aunt Gerald!" Edgar ejaculated. "I did not know she was so ill. Is she really, do you think, not likely to recover?"

"Well, I really don't know. Miss Derwent said the doctors were puzzled about her case. She is dreadfully nervous. What a pity it is when people are nervous. I hope

you do not suffer from nervousness, dear Margaret?"

"I am quite well," Ita said; but she could hardly have asserted with truth that she did not suffer from nervousness, for ever since her arrival in England she had felt an inward agitation, that made her hands cold, her cheeks hot, and caused her to start at the least noise.

That day at dinner the conversation was kept up principally by Mr. Langdon and Edgar. Their two wives were chiefly occupied with watching and turning the course of conversation, when it veered towards dangerous subjects. There could not be two persons more unsuited than Mrs. Langdon's husband and her son. Not only did they on most points differ in opinion, but their characters and habits of mind were essentially opposed and irritating to one another. There was a shade of solemnity in Edgar's manner, a slight inclination to lecture others, and lay down the law, which provoked those not predisposed in his favour. His handsome face—his earnest and expressive countenance—his gentleness and kindness, made up, in

the opinion of most people, for those little defects which were never glaring nor obtrusive, but just happened to be those which particularly provoked Mr. Langdon. He thought his step-son pompous and dictatorial, and he met the heavy ammunition of his earnest and energetic arguments with a volley of light sarcasms and jests, which tried beyond measure Edgar's patience. Their peculiarities reacted reciprocally on their tempers, and Edgar was never half so consequential, or Mr. Langdon half so flippant, as in each other's society.

For some time, by dint of good management on the part of Mrs. Langdon and her daughter-in-law, none but the safest subjects were discussed, and they thought all danger of an encounter had blown over, when at dessert all at once Mr. Langdon began on what they all felt to be *une question brûlante.*

"So your friends the Rolands have *turned*, as the poor people call it."

There was a dead silence.

Then Edgar said, in a very grave voice, "It is very sad."

"And pray why is it sad?" Mr. Langdon asked. "They are now openly what they were in secret before. They have told the truth and shamed the devil, as we used to be advised to do in old days. They are honest, *voilà tout.*"

Edgar's colour rose, and his eyes assumed the peculiar expression which his mother knew betokened a storm. She said, in a way intended to be soothing—

"You know, my dear boy, that Mr. Langdon has never been able to understand about Church principles, and how Protestants can be Catholics . . . ."

"My dear mother," Edgar began, in a deprecating tone; but in the meantime Mr. Langdon burst forth—

"Church principles—Church fiddlesticks! I can understand Protestant principles and Catholic principles, but not the principle of being both at the same time. Just because a set of young fellows at Oxford wanted to have a Catholic Church of their own, and would not make use of the long-established one which had served the purpose since St. Peter's time, they must needs try and turn

our poor old respectable Protestant Church of England into something she never was, poor dear! and never was meant to be, and make her play her new part, awkwardly enough at times, I fancy. I sometimes sit and laugh at the thought of what old George III. would have said if any one had told him the Church of England was *not* Protestant!"

"I really cannot enter into an argument on this subject," Edgar exclaimed, "in the tone which you use. It is far too important a one, especially for a priest of the Church of England."

Mr. Langdon's eyes twinkled with an amused expression. "I beg your pardon," he said. "I fancied that when you married, you had given up that Popish idea of being a priest. Pray, Mrs. Derwent, has he converted you to the *via media* religion. Is that its name now?"

Ita made no answer, and did not raise her eyes from her dessert plate.

Mrs. Langdon, in despair, gave the signal for withdrawal. It was dangerous to leave Edgar and her husband *tête-à-tête*, but worse

to remain and be present at any further discussion between them.

When she and Ita were seated on the sofa in the drawing-room, she said to her, "I am so annoyed at the way Mr. Langdon will go on talking before Edgar, as if on purpose to provoke him. I was afraid he would begin about the Rolands, though I had told him it was a sore subject. But now, my dear, seriously, quite between ourselves, it is really of great consequence that dear Edgar should not go into extremes. I have never been against his Puseyite ideas up to a certain point, you know; indeed, I often go myself to the daily service at St. Paul's, and I should not object to see twenty lighted candles on the altar. I have no prejudices on the subject, but it would be a real misfortune if these opinions were to stand in the way of his future preferment. If he will keep clear of extremes, he may, with his talents and advantages, rise very high in the Church. I assure you I have heard many people say that he is just the sort of person who might one day be a bishop. You see, my dear, if you should have a family, your present means

would not be at all sufficient to make you comfortable. I know Miss Derwent says she does not intend to marry, but that is a sort of thing one cannot reckon upon."

"Oh no, certainly not," Ita exclaimed, glad there was one point on which she could entirely agree with her mother-in-law. "We wish her very much to marry?"

"And most likely she will do so; but that just proves what I say. Good prospects in his profession should not be lightly thrown away; and you can have no idea, my dear, how much going into extremes interferes with a clergyman's chances of preferment. And then one never knows what those opinions may lead to. . . . These poor Rolands! I was horribly vexed that Mr. Langdon mentioned them; but really, my love, it is a terrible case. They have actually not bread enough to eat!"

"Is it as bad as that?" Ita said, deeply shocked.

"Of course, nothing can be worse. How is a man of forty to live and support a wife and two children? It is too late to turn to any other profession."

"Eliza has been confined?"

"Yes; she had another little girl about six weeks ago. It is impossible to conceive anything more unfortunate. She is far from strong, and Jane tells me they cannot afford to keep a servant. It is ruin—perfect ruin. But one thing you see leads to another, as I was saying just now. That is why I am so anxious that Edgar should not commit him- to extreme opinions . . . ."

"But if they *are* his opinions, dear Mrs. Langdon?"

"Then let him moderate them, and draw back from extreme acts, as many others have done. I assure you that a wife can do a great deal, in these cases, in a quiet, unobtrusive manner, just by putting in a word at the right time, and showing how much she dreads her husband going too far. I have always looked to your influence as the means of preventing Edgar's doing anything rash. That was my great comfort when he married."

The candid admission that she wanted comfort at that moment almost made Ita smile. Wishing to change the subject, she

said, "I really think Edgar is getting much better."

"He looks pretty well, on the whole," her mother-in-law answered. "If you can only keep him from working too hard till he gets quite strong again! He used to say that you were worth three curates. I do not know what he could do without you always at his elbow. But I wonder why they do not come upstairs. I am afraid it must be very bad for Edgar to argue and excite himself. I think I had better ring for tea, and let them know when it is ready. If you are not too tired to play and sing, it would prevent their talking, and Mr. Langdon likes it so much."

Ita was just as anxious as her mother-in-law to stop any more conversation about religion. So, as soon as her husband and Mr. Langdon came into the drawing-room, she went to the pianoforte and sung some French and Italian songs.

"I hope you have not forgotten all your English songs," Mrs. Langdon said. "I must have my favourite 'Ruth.'"

"I cannot sing that," Ita murmured,

turning over the leaves of her book to find something else.

"But I have got the music here, if you have forgotten it," Mrs. Langdon officiously exclaimed, and placed before her daughter-in-law words, which seemed to her, written in letters of fire. During the first months of their marriage it had been Edgar's delight to hear her sing them. They sounded to him like a pledge of her devotion to him, and her fidelity to his Church. He attached a particular meaning to Ruth's adjuration, and his wife used to utter it with an earnest pathos, which suited, he thought, her position and his own. She was, in one sense, an alien from his own land. She had been baptized, conditionally, at least, in a foreign communion, and he loved to hear her say, "Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." Ita knew he liked this piece of music on account of these words, and she also had once been conscious of some vague feeling of the kind. The last time he had heard them from her lips was on the day at Mentone, when he had been seriously alarmed at what he called her Romish tendencies, and had tried, by the

strong expression of his own feelings, to crush them in the bud. Since then she had put this song aside, and her husband had not asked for it. Now, however, with the music-book open before her, she was obliged to comply with Mrs. Langdon's request, and began, in a faltering voice, which gradually became steadier, the well-known strain. Edgar's eyes were fixed on the newspaper in his hand, but he listened eagerly to that sweet voice and to that old familiar air. It might be only his fancy, but though she sang as earnestly as ever, there seemed to him a different accent—a different spirit in the way in which she pronounced the words. Once they had sounded like the cry of a heart cleaving with a blind worship to the object of a human love, now they rose like the expression of the most ardent desire that can inspire an immortal soul—that of winning to its own faith one dearer than life itself. The words had assumed another meaning in her thoughts. There were but one God, one people, and one Church, for Edgar and herself. *She* could never turn back. The light was on before. There was hope, at that moment, in her face

and in her voice. He instinctively felt that she was calling on him to follow her; no longer following him with trembling footsteps along the shadowy path of uncertainty and doubt. In spite of himself, he felt it. He tried to stifle the thought; but it crossed his mind in that instant like a ray of light, soon quenched, however, by a determined act of the will. He was glad when the notes died away in his ears, but the echo they left behind in his mind did not subside as speedily.

No one asked for another song. Ita was very tired, and went early to bed. When Edgar had also left them, Mr. Langdon said to his wife, "That daughter-in-law of yours, Mrs. Langdon, is one in a thousand. One of the greatest darlings I ever saw."

"I hope she will always make Edgar happy," Mrs. Langdon answered, with a sigh. "She is a good little thing, and I like her very much. Still, it is a great pity he did not marry his cousin."

"What, that dull piece of goods? Of course, it would have been the right thing; but, for my part, I am glad he fell in love

with the mermaid. I only hope they will not turn Papists, and he become a monk and she a nun."

"You do not mean that clergymen and their wives do that when they secede, or whatever it is called."

"Of course they do. What else could happen?"

"But the Rolands have not?"

"Only wait a little and see."

"Then it is still worse than I thought."

In spite of the experience which the whole course of her married life should have given her, Mrs. Langdon had never yet learnt not to understand literally her husband's assertions.

The next day Edgar took his wife to see a house of charity, where an Anglican Sisterhood carried on various works for the benefit of the poor, which he used to be greatly interested in before his marriage. He thought she would be favourably impressed by the Catholic appearance of this convent, the beauty of the chapel, and the piety of the sisters, and as they visited the whole of the building, accompanied by the superioress and the chaplain,

he anxiously watched Ita's countenance. He was not wholly disappointed, nor yet quite satisfied with the effect it seemed to make upon her. Now that she had lost all belief in the Catholicism of the Church of England, this display of its outward forms gave her more pain than pleasure. She admired the good works of the nuns, but there was something artificial and unreal in their studied imitation of the religious life, which she thought repulsive. The expressions in use among the so-called Anglo-Catholics grated on her ear.

At that time Mass, Benediction, Confession, were words which even in Sisterhoods were not in use. The bold innovations of the present day were not thought of, but there was an advance in that direction—the Puseyites were feeling their way, and approaching to the point the Ritualists have now reached. They took advantage of every doubtful expression in the Prayer-book which would sanction some new development, and called Roman practices by Anglican names, thus creating a phraseology that reminds one somewhat of Talleyrand's view of language:

"La parole a été donnée à l'homme pour déguiser sa pensée."*

This effort to disguise what they dared not avow, was conspicuous in all the arrangements of the convent, and Ita was glad to get away from the chapel and the parlour where the superioress, the clergyman who directed the home, and Edgar, conversed in this strain, and to go to the sick wards, which were beautifully arranged. A large crucifix and several holy pictures hung on the wall. The image of our Blessed Lady was not to be seen there, but as they passed afterwards near the oratory of the sisters, Ita caught a glimpse of a pretty statue surrounded with nosegays of flowers. She glanced at her husband. He avoided meeting her eyes. He had so often spoken with severe disapproval of the devotion of Roman Catholics to the Blessed Virgin, that he did not like to be called upon at once to express a different opinion, or to blame the Anglican Sisters. But the truth was that a change had taken place in his own mind on the subject, and he

* "Language was given to man to enable him to conceal his thoughts."

took an opportunity of whispering to his wife as they walked through the passage that led to the hospital, "I hope the day may come when prudence will permit us to pay that homage in public to the Blessed Virgin which devout hearts in our Church offer up in secret." She sighed—the time was past when such hopes could satisfy or quiet her soul.

As they passed through the long room occupied by the patients, one poor woman, apparently in a decline, whispered to the young sister who was giving her a cup of tea, that she would like to speak to the lady who was going through the ward.

This was conveyed to the superioress, who kindly stopped and asked Ita if she would gratify the sick woman's desire. "She is a foreigner," she added, "an Italian, who has been here some weeks."

Ita complied with the request, and standing by the bedside, said in a gentle voice, "Are you very ill? do you suffer much?"

"Yes," the woman answered in English. "I am so weak. I have no strength left at all. I did think I should get strong here with the good food and wine, but it does me

no good. I will go away. I will die at home."

"Have you any friends in London?"

"Yes, one daughter. She has been married many years to an Englishman. I am myself an Italian."

"You speak English very well for a foreigner."

"I learnt it when I with my husband kept an hotel at Florence; our house was always full of English people. When he died I lost all I had, and came here."

Ita bent down her head close to the poor woman, and whispered, "Are you a Roman Catholic?"

"Yes," she eagerly replied in the same tone; and then added, "They say they are of the same religion here—all Catholics. That is all very well; it may be so, but I want to see one of my own priests. I will go home to-morrow."

"I dare say they would send for a Roman Catholic priest, if you asked them."

"Ah, but I had rather go home. I shall never get well. I should not like to die here."

"Where do you live?"

"At 15, Little North Street, Manchester Square. Will you come and see me there?"

"I am only in London for a day or two. I hardly think I can find time to call on you. But perhaps I could ask somebody else to do so."

Ita was moving away. The sick woman laid her hand on her arm, and detained her. "Excuse me," she said, "but will you tell me your name?"

"Mrs. Derwent."

"Derwent! Ah, there it is! You are just like what she was at your age—the lady I knew—the lady who was drowned with her husband in the Gulf of Genoa. Are you their daughter?"

"No," she answered, blushing deeply, "I am their nephew's wife. I married Mr. Edgar Derwent. You knew, then, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Derwent?"

"Certainly I did. But you are so like her!"

"I have been told that I am like her picture."

"Do come, Ita," Edgar cried. "We are going to the schools."

"Will you come and see me?" the sick woman eagerly said.

"I will try," Ita answered, as she hurried away to join her husband. She would have given anything to stop with the poor woman, and, when she had left her, remembered that she had not asked her name. The superioress, however, told her that it was Ranolfi.

It was difficult to fix her mind on the exhibition of copy-books and needlework, which she was called upon to admire, and even on the evolutions in the infant school, which she usually enjoyed very much. At last everything was over, and they went to the door where Mrs. Langdon's brougham, which she had lent them for the day, was waiting.

"I shall walk home," Edgar said. "You can do your shopping, and on your way back leave our cards on the Carsdales."

Ita had been wishing, ever since her arrival in London, to tell him that she wanted to call on Eliza. Now, with desperate courage, as she was getting into the carriage, she said so. A cloud passed over his face. He hesi-

tated. She added, "Your mother says she has been very unwell since her confinement, and they are so ill off. I really must go and see her, dearest."

"As you please," he coldly replied, and walked away.

"Do as you choose," are words which sometimes leave a heavy weight on the hearts of those to whom they are addressed. But Ita had no doubt that it was right to go and see Eliza, unless her husband had particularly forbidden it. So, availing herself of the ungracious permission, she told the footman that she wished to be driven to number four in a little narrow street behind Manchester Square.

When they arrived there, the loud rap at the door seemed out of keeping with the humble appearance of the house. The girl who opened it said Mrs. Roland was at home, and showed Ita up to the third story, where she found Eliza in a very small and badly-furnished room, arranged, however, with that attempt at comfort and prettiness which betokens the habits of one accustomed to a different sort of abode. She was looking ill,

though the colour that rushed into her face when her friend came in, disguised its paleness. Her baby was in its cradle, and her little girl, Ita's godchild, sat playing on the floor.

"Oh, dearest Mrs. Derwent," she exclaimed, "I am so glad to see you! I hardly thought you would come. Will you sit down here?" she added, making room for her on the black horse-hair sofa. "How is your husband?"

"A great deal better, thank you. And how is Mr. Roland?"

"Not very well. He suffers much from his headaches. Meggy, come here and kiss your godmother."

The little thing got up with difficulty, and made a bad walk of it to the sofa.

"She is not strong on her legs," her mother said, taking her up on her knees.

"She is not so rosy as she used to be," Ita answered, as she kissed the little girl.

"That is the only hard part of it," Eliza said, in a low voice.

"Their being ill, you mean?"

"Meggy is not ill. It is only the change,

the want of air and exercise, that makes her weak; but my husband is really out of health . . . ."

"And you, dear Eliza?"

"Oh, I am pretty well."

There was a moment's silence; then she said, "Eliza, you have gone through this great change. Tell me, have you found it what you expected?"

"No, not what I expected. To the last moment I fancied I should still feel some doubts and misgivings after I became a Catholic, but I have never done so. From the first moment, everything has seemed to me real, true, natural; and, as regards the inward life, the life of the soul, perfect contentment and happiness."

"Then you are glad you changed . . . ."

"Yes, glad, indeed. It makes up for all past and present sufferings . . . ."

"Dearest Eliza, you have had much to go through."

"A good deal, in one way and another. Sometimes, when I think of Bramblemoor, of the view from the back window of our house over the common, and of the feeling of

the air, with the smell of the fir-trees, it gives me a faint sensation I can hardly describe. But it does not last . . . . and I would not be there again as we were, trying to persuade ourselves we were Catholics, and leaning wearily on that shadow of a Church that gave one no support or help. . . . . It is like a bad dream to look back to it. My husband feels just as I do. We wonder together, sometimes, how we could be so long deceived by our ardent wishes . . . . He is very good, very patient."

"How strange it seems to look back to the time when you were such a thorough Anglican, and your arguments with Annie."

"Yes; nobody can say that we did not try to believe in the Church of England. Indeed it was almost a matter life and death to us."

Ita pressed her hand, and said inquiringly, "You mean . . . .?"

"Why, dear Ita, I do not see, humanly speaking, how my husband can support us and live. He does some copying for a lawyer, but this brings in very little, and he is often over-tired. I try to earn something by

needlework, but with two children and no servant, there is little time for it."

"Have you no servant at all?"

"No, not the shadow of one," Eliza answered, with a smile. "Sometimes I get a charwoman for the day; you know we are quite—quite poor. But you must not look so unhappy, Ita; it is wonderful how one bears things that seem terrible to look forward to. I could not help thinking during my last confinement of the time when this child was born, and all your tender care of me, the luxuries I had, and all that Annie sent me. How different it was; but yet was happy—so thankful we had not delayed our conversion till after my confinement."

"The last days at Bramblemoor must have been the worst part of it. Last days are always so sad."

"They were very sad; you know Annie would not see us before we left."

"When we went to Italy you did not think of taking this step?"

"No; Mr. Roland used sometimes to speak to me—he had done so for some time—of the possibility that it would come to that.

I tried to shut my eyes to it, but I believe that at last I saw even more strongly than he did, that we could not remain as we were. He worked so hard that he had not as much time for thinking as I had. However, when it came to the point we were perfectly agreed. Is Mr. Derwent as angry with us as ever?"

"He never mentions you, but I saw yesterday when Mr. Langdon alluded to the subject, that he still feels it very much. Eliza, the clergyman at the home in —— Street said yesterday that nobody has an idea of the regrets that converts feel, though they have not courage to go back."

"Did he?" Eliza answered, with an amused smile. "I wonder how he gets his information on the subject. The Rev. Mr. Bennet, in a sermon he published some time ago, spoke of the cruel disappointment experienced by converts to the Church of Rome, and adds, 'they never tell us of these feelings.' One cannot help asking: How then is their existence known? I was so afraid that Mr. Derwent would not let you come to me; I am so glad he did not prevent it."

Eliza's eyes were filled with tears; Ita's were overflowing. She remembered all Eliza's former delight in her little home at Bramblemoor, which they had all combined to make a perfect cottage residence; her intense love of country life; her charities to the poor; her little feasts for the school-children; her walks over the common with her own little girl in search of blackberries and thistledown; and then looked on the dingy walls, the wretched, low houses opposite, the absence of comforts, the pale children, and then of what Mrs. Langdon had said, that sometimes they actually wanted bread. Could this be literally true? She could not go away without trying to find out.

"Dear Eliza," she said, "you will not mind my asking you . . . .?" she paused.

"If it is anything about religion, dearest Ita, I would rather you asked my husband than myself . . . ." her voice shook with emotion. "I am so afraid of urging you to what, if once you see it plainly, you must act upon: I fear you have not courage to do so. Perhaps, too, though this is wrong, I am also afraid of what you may have to suffer . . ."

"I was not just then thinking of myself," Ita answered, "what I wanted to say just now when you spoke of sufferings was this, have you been, are you ever in real *want?*"

Eliza's lip quivered. "I had rather not speak of that. I should only give way."

"Oh, but do not give way—do speak out," Ita impetuously exclaimed. "You were always too reserved. Has it come to what I said. Dear Eliza, now at this moment, would this sovereign be of any use . . . . to buy something for baby," she added, trembling, lest her offer should wound.

"Thank you so much," Eliza said, smiling; "it will buy us food. Yes, it is a great blessing—a great relief. My husband could not get any copying last week, but he will have some to-morrow. Dear Ita, you never gave an alms that was more thankfully received."

"But do not your parents know this? and Jane? Have they quite forsaken you?"

"No; they come to see me sometimes—Jane, at least, and I go and see my father and mother. They are not unkind, but they think

we must abide by the consequences of the step we have taken. And then I do not let them know quite how bad it is. They would only be more angry with my husband. They say it is dishonourable after marrying me to have thrown up the means of existence."

"Well, I should have thought everybody, however they might regret the result, would respect you for sacrificing all earthly considerations for conscience' sake."

"The tone of the Anglican papers," Eliza said, "sometimes makes one smile on this subject. The other day, when literally we did not know where we should get wherewith to exist, if my husband did not obtain some employment, and he did not know where to turn for it, I met with a passage of this sort in one of those papers: 'Let them go, those who will not bear the heat and burthen of the day; who will not fight and suffer for the Church. Let them seek ease, comfort, and sunshine in a foreign Communion, while we struggle on in faith and patience.' I could not help thinking, not only of ourselves, but of others still worse off than we have yet been."

"Are there many such?"

"So many that those who would and do try to help them, are almost in despair, and the number increases, of course, every day! Thank God for it; yes, thank God for it, in spite of all this suffering. The case of married Anglican clergymen is, of course, temporally speaking, worse than any other."

"What a variety of trials there are in the world," Ita exclaimed.

"You would think so, indeed, if you lived in London. It is in itself a trial to see so much misery that you cannot relieve. Oh, the amount of it that comes across one every day, and the hardening of heart that seems almost inevitably to ensue! If we had heard at Holmwood or Bramblemoor of a family with two or three sick persons without a bed to lie on, and children crying for food, how horrified we should have been. Here we know that such are to be found at every corner and turn of this terrible London."

"I always thought you a courageous woman, Eliza. Now I think so more than ever."

"Do you? Why?"

"Because you look so calm, while I can hardly bear the idea of what you go through."

"You do not yet know the blessings which soften the trials."

"Perhaps more than you suppose of both," Ita said, rising to go.

Eliza looked at her earnestly. She was surprised to see so little apparent struggle in her mind. She did not know that the struggle was in one sense past, though the keenest suffering was to come.

"Do you know any one," Ita said, as she was going towards the door, "who would look after a poor Italian woman, who is going back to her home in this neighbourhood to-morrow, from the hospital in —— Street? I think some of your friends would be interested in her; for she leaves that place on account of her religion. Not that they are illiberal, I believe, towards Roman Catholics; but she wishes to die at home."

"I will go and see her myself," Eliza said, "and if she wants assistance I will speak of her to others."

"I shall be so glad if you will, for I promised to ask some one to visit her."

With a parting kiss Ita took leave of her friend. As she was driving home her thoughts ran painfully on Eliza's poverty, and the little she could do to relieve it; for she had exhausted her slender means before leaving Mentone in providing for the payment of a small pension to Mariana. Her mind kept dwelling on the surrender so simply made of all the comforts, and almost the necessaries of life, by Eliza and her husband; and on the strength of the convictions which had forced it upon them. As she was crossing Hyde Park on her way back to Lowndes Square, she was delayed by the crowd of carriages; the contrast between the dingy little rooms near Manchester Square and that brilliant scene struck her forcibly. While she was slowly following the string, Jane, Eliza's sister, passed in a smart carriage, and dressed in the extreme of the fashion. Their eyes met; they smiled and bowed. Jane had married a rich banker, and had a house in Grosvenor Place. There was another contrast; another mystery to such a heart as Ita's. One sister wealthy and prosperous; the other . . . . She thought of the grateful

tears which had flowed when her own poor little offering had been made. Of course, Jane did not know the extremity of Eliza's poverty; but she must see the absence of all comforts in her poor abode. But then, again, Eliza had chosen her own fate. No pity was due to her. Her relations turned away from the thought of her trials like the Pagan judges did from those of the martyrs who would obstinately meet the wild beasts, or plunge into a furnace, sooner than deny their faith. "It is their own fault." This sentence hardens hearts which would naturally, perhaps, compassionate the sufferings of others.

"If they choose to bring up their children Roman Catholics, it is their own doing if they starve," Eliza's father sometimes said; and that remark relieved him from any troublesome feelings of responsibility.

Ita mused on these things as her equipage made its way through the thickest of the crowd in Hyde Park Corner, and when she reached Lowndes Square it was time to dress for the dinner at Lord Carsdale's.

In the twilight of a summer evening,

about twenty people were waiting for the announcement of dinner in Lady Carsdale's drawing-room. Ita and her husband were amongst the number, but she at least knew no one there except her old friend Mr. Hendon, who, to her great satisfaction, took her down to dinner. On her other side was a young man she had never seen before, whom, however, she guessed, by his likeness to Lady Emma Lorton, to be one of her brothers. As she was seated at the corner of the table, the conversation was carried on for some time between her two neighbours and herself; but when Mr. Cars turned round to speak to the lady on his other side, she and Mr. Hendon began to talk of Holmwood. He asked if they were soon going there, and said he had heard that Mrs. Gerald had been looking forward anxiously to their return.

"Have you seen her lately?" Ita asked.

"Yes, last Saturday, and I own I was struck with her looking very ill. There is such a restless expression, something so keen and over-eager in her countenance; she always had it to a certain degree, but it has very much increased lately."

"Does she go out driving as usual?"

"I did not hear. Miss Derwent said it was very difficult to induce her to leave her room. She asked me to go and sit with her. I had not been for many years in that room. I was surprised at her making me look at the pictures of the late Mr. and Mrs. Robert Derwent. She told me to draw aside the curtain before them. I thought she had never been able to bring herself to speak of them. How strangely like the portrait of the lady is to you!"

"And how extraordinary it is," Ita thought, "that twice in the same day this likeness should have been mentioned to me!" And not being inclined to let the subject drop, she said, "You mean the one with the turban?"

"Yes; it is a charming picture. There is something in the expression of the mouth like the picture of the Cenci, and you have it too. It is not at all like Miss Derwent, though she is very handsome also in her way—very much improved this year. She is grown thinner and paler, which becomes her, I think; she wanted fining down. And

are you going now to settle at the Vicarage for good and all?"

"I suppose so; at least if Edgar is well enough to remain in England next winter."

"Did you enjoy yourself abroad?"

"Very much till he fell ill. I often thought of you at Mentone. It was such a pleasure to see all our favourite spots again."

"Ay, ay, our old hunting fields — the nooks and corners—where we found the first anemones, and the tulips, and your dear periwinkles. Stay, was it not to Capo Martino we went for the early crocuses?"

"Oh, yes; and then the orchids in the Mentone valley. Do you remember the day we walked all the way to Castellar?"

"Did we, indeed? I know you used to take me long distances, especially when you wanted some particular flower. How have the old people kept up the garden of the Villa?"

"Pretty well. Fraunco is getting old. By the way, he and Antonia asked a great deal after you. You ought to have come and joined us."

"I am getting lazy about travelling. Even coming to London is rather an effort. By the way, have you come across those foolish people the Rolands?"

"I have seen Eliza to-day."

"No; have you? How is she? Is it true that they have positively nothing to live upon?"

"I am afraid so. Nothing can be worse off than they are about money."

Mr. Hendon shrugged his shoulders.

"What a pity it is they should have committed such a piece of folly. Mind, I do not, for my part, care a straw whether people are Catholics or Protestants; but, really, when it comes to ruining the whole of a person's prospects, and beggaring wife and children, it is lamentable. They were so comfortable at Bramblemoor, if people would have left them alone. It was all very well for the Sydneys to please themselves: they could afford to become Roman Catholics, if it suited them, but those poor Rolands, I am very sorry for them . . . ."

"Eliza does not seem unhappy."

"Poor Eliza, such a desperate Anglican

as she used to be. Do you remember the fights I used to have with her about her theory of branch churches, and her being so angry at my calling her particular little section of the Church of England *the twig?*"

"Indeed I do; and your arguments about the illogical position of Anglicanism; they made a great impression upon me."

"Good heavens! I hope not," Mr. Hendon exclaimed, with a funny look of dismay. "Not the wrong way, I hope. Nothing I said drove you in a Roman direction, I trust . . . .?"

Ita, not choosing to answer this question, turned a little towards her other neighbour. Having overheard her speaking of Mentone and San Remo, he said, "Have you read, Mrs. Derwent, that charming book, 'Doctor Antonio?'"

"Yes, I have," she answered, with a smile.

"And are you not delighted with it?"

"I like some of it; the descriptions of scenery, and pictures of manners, for in-

stance, very much, but it is a very unjust and foolish book, I think, in some ways."

"What do you mean?" Mr. Cars asked, quite astonished.

"Well, the author gives, for instance, a glowing description of the women of the Riviera. He says they are as good as good can be—the best wives and mothers in the world, and that the people are altogether more sober and well conducted than in any other country he knows. That drunkenness is very rare, and crime almost unknown in some of the provinces on that coast, San Remo in particular; and then in the same breath, or rather the same page, he states that, provided the churches are well-attended, the alms plentiful, and the confessions and communions numerous, the clergy care little about the morals of the people. He praises the virtues of his countrymen, and then abuses their religion. Is this just or reasonable?"

"I did not observe that passage," Mr. Cars replied.

"Then, again, this writer, who is so proud of Italy, and has, so he says, at least,

such a strong feeling about it—sneers at the religious spirit which has filled even the smallest towns, mere villages, with beautiful churches, displaying the most wonderful works of art. He ridicules the confraternities which have been the means, by their very innocent rivalries, of keeping up this love of the beautiful, this taste for the arts in Italy. Surely the objects of these associations—the building of churches, the decoration of altars, the beauty of God's service—are more refining and elevating than the average recreations and interests of the lower orders in this country? People sneer at the number of churches and chapels in Italy. Let them count the gin palaces in London, and the public-houses in small English towns. Oh, if people would only be fair!"

"There is one of your old bursts of indignation!" Mr. Hendon exclaimed, laughing. "I remember your habit of sitting quarrelling with a book. I have seen you get as flushed and eager with a volume in your hand, as if you were in the midst of an argument."

"Oh yes, I cannot help it. Really, I can

bear (don't laugh) people to differ from me. I can bear their saying things I dislike, and disagree with—but it is injustice that is so hard to endure. What the Bishop of Orleans calls *la savante malice* of misrepresentation —the violent cry against one country or one party for things which are passed over in perfect silence when done even in a more glaring manner by others; the unequal balances in which actions are weighed. I wish those dealers in moral false weights could be brought to justice sometimes."

"But, my dear little lady, do you think any one is quite just and quite consistent? Is not every one more or less swayed by passion, prejudice, or enthusiasm?"

"Yes, I believe so, to a certain degree; but still there is an immense difference between people in the kind of rectitude I mean. I have met with books, read speeches in Parliament, which, from the bottom of my heart, I protested against as regarded the opinions of the writer or the speaker, but in which one felt there was truth and honesty."

"What should you say of me as regards consistency?"

"I think you are generally consistent, but . . . ."

"But what?"

"Sometimes I wish," this Ita said in a low voice, "that you were not so consistent."

"Now, really that is too bad, Ita mia. You said just now that you were not angry with people if only they were consistent . . . ."

"No—and I am not angry with you; but I am sorry because I think . . . . I mean, for instance, that you do not care, as you said just now, about people being of different religions, because I am afraid . . . . I mean that you do not think one more true than another."

"I think there is some truth in all."

"You do? I am glad you say so," Ita said, looking pleased.

"There is only one religion I consider consistent in its teaching; but then I cannot bring myself to believe what it teaches. I mean the Roman Catholic Church."

"But that is terrible, because if all others are inconsistent, they cannot be true, and so it ends in your . . . ."

"Come, we will not talk of what it ends in. There are arguments which had better not be forced to their conclusion."

There was rather an awkward pause, and then Ita, partly to change the subject, and partly to bring back the conversation to a point deeply interesting to her, said, "Mr. Hendon, were you acquainted — we were speaking of them just now — with Annie Derwent's parents?"

"Very well, with her father—but I never saw her mother."

"And did you know Edgar's father?"

"Yes, when he was a boy, and then, after many years had elapsed, I called on him in his last illness, after his brother's death. He was not at all a favourite with Mrs. Gerald."

"Was he like Edgar?"

"A little, but not nearly so good-looking."

"Who painted the pictures in Mrs. Gerald's room?"

"She told me that the portraits of Robert and his wife and child were taken at Florence, when they went there from Nice; I do not

know the artist's name. The others are by English painters, I think."

"Did Mrs. Gerald see her brother Herbert after Mr. Robert Derwent's death?"

"No, I think not. He died some months only after the death of Robert, and she was abroad."

Ita was continuing to talk about the family with the vague hope of hearing some new fact or detail about them, but Lady Carsdale soon gave the signal nod, and the women left the drawing-room.

Nothing of interest passed in the evening as far as Ita was concerned. Conversation with some new acquaintances, who were introduced to her, proved dull and heavy work to a mind as preoccupied as hers was at that moment. She was glad when it was time to go home; and her head ached that night as she laid it on the pillow. Her sleep was restless, and her waking anxious.

The next day was Sunday. She always went to church with her husband, though she had not received the Sacrament since the time when, during his illness at Mentone, she had made up her mind to become a Catholic.

That morning he had been to what he called an early celebration at St. Paul's, Knightsbridge, and she attended with him the eleven o'clock service. It would probably be the last time, she thought, that they would kneel side by side in an Anglican Church, and while her heart ached with the most acute human sorrow at the idea of this approaching separation, a great calm strength supported her. When she said the words in the Creed, "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church," she mentally pledged herself to delay no longer the act which was to make her—not possibly, not even probably, but assuredly—a member of that Church. She felt like one about to emerge out of a mist, where fanciful shadows delude the sight, into the clear sunshine they begin to discern.

When, after the afternoon service that day, Edgar said to her, "Shall we go and take a walk in Kensington Gardens?" she said "Yes," and knew the decisive moment was come. During this walk she must tell him of her irrevocable resolution.

It was one of those summer days which, even in London, are delightful. Hyde Park

was not so beautiful then as it is now—not gay with those brilliant flower-beds and undulating banks which charm the eye and cheer the heart, chiefly by the thought that all that loveliness and perfume and sweetness is within reach of the poor and the hard-worked in their brief hours of recreation and repose; but a recent shower had freshened and deepened the green of the grass that evening, and the lime-trees near Rotten Row were shedding their delicious perfume, and the wavelets of the Serpentine glittering in the sunshine. As they passed alongside of it, Edgar repeated to his wife lines which often haunt the memory of those who are apt to muse on the strange and terrible contrasts, the lurid lights and the dark shadows, of London in its pride and in its misery :—

"Oh! Those old trees! What see they when the beam
Falls on blue waters from the bluer sky?
When young hope whispers low, with smiles that seem
Too joyous to be answered with a sigh?
The scene is then of prosperous gaiety;
Thick, swarming crowds on summer pleasures bent,
And equipages formed for luxury;
While rosy children, young and innocent,
Dance on the onward path, and frolic with content:
But when the scattered leaves on those wan boughs

Quiver beneath the night wind's rustling breath;
When jocund merriment and whispered vows
And children's shouts are hushed; and still as death
Lies all in heaven above and earth beneath,
What see the old trees then?" * * *

* * * * * *

As Ita walked on with a beating heart and languid step, for all her strength seemed in that trying hour to have passed from her frame into her heart, she thought what varieties of human sufferings there are, and that those old trees thus questioned by one well acquainted with sorrow, had seldom looked down on such a grief as hers; and yet griefs of this sort are now rending the breasts of many and many a one in this land. The most acute pangs, the sharpest struggles exist in many a peaceable English home—in the midst of quiet outward lives, shielded from notice, debarred from consolation or aid, by the strong power of reserve inherent in our English nature, by the long habits of self-control women worth anything acquire. Acute as is this form of mental misery which we have depicted in Ita's case, there is one blessed feature in it: it arises from no mean, no

* "The Child of the Islands," by Mrs. Norton.

weak, no sinful passion; it takes its birth in the deepest, truest, and noblest part of our being; it comes from God, tends to Him, and most often ends in Him. And where mutual suffering is endured, where loving hearts afflict each other—and even where, on one side, there seems hard and cruel usage —it may be, surely it sometimes is, without sin on either side; the violent and stern treatment which almost breaks a tender heart, may be like Saul's presence at the first martyr's death—the strange presage of an approaching change—the augury of one of those transformations which are doomed to astonish the world.

When they reached Kensington Gardens, Ita asked her husband to sit down on a bench near the clump of Spanish chesnuts behind the powder-magazine, and after a few insignificant remarks had passed between them, she said, "Dearest Edgar, I must tell you the truth. I must be a Roman Catholic." The dead silence which followed these words was perhaps the hardest trial she had to go through. She did not feel it possible to add another word before he had spoken, and it

seemed as if he would never speak. His eyes were fixed on the ground; he did not move; was he bearing it better than she had expected, or was he shocked beyond utterance?

At last he said, "Do you fully understand what this implies? all it involves?"

"I do, Edgar," she answered. "I have counted the cost—it is dreadful for both of us—but it *must* be." She uttered those last words with a tremulous emphasis, more expressive than the words themselves.

"No; it *must not be*," he passionately exclaimed. "It is utter destruction, misery, and despair. An end to all our wedded love and happiness."

"Our happiness, perhaps," she answered, with intense emotion, "but not our love—not mine, at least. God knows, I never loved you more than I do now. Oh, dearest Edgar, do try to understand, try to feel for me."

"You have no feeling for me; you say you are determined to oppose me; you despise my religion and insult my Church."

"It is of no use to answer, or to argue," she said, folding her hands together, and

looking straight before her with a sort of appealing earnestness, "God knows how I love you, and He knows too what He asks of me."

"Wait."

"I *have* waited. I can wait no longer. Ever since your illness at Mentone my mind has been made up."

Another long silence ensued, then Edgar said, "I cannot speak of this; too much is at stake for me; my very anxiety, my intense interest in the question, precludes me from saying what I would, what I ought. Do not let us utter another word on the subject now. In a few hours I shall be better able to speak to you about it."

They walked home in almost total silence. How often when we go about in the thoroughfares of a great city we may be close to persons whose souls are filled with tumultuous agitation, whose destinies are hanging on a thread, or whose hopes have been suddenly crushed, who may have just taken a fatal or a heroic resolution, and we know it not. Children of the same Father in heaven—all creatures of God, and members of the same

race—we remain strangers to all but a few of that vast kindred of ours. Isolated by the boundless size of the great human family, it is only when some great visible calamity or some casual event breaks the silent barrier between man and man, that the relationship is felt and acknowledged. Have we not sometimes seen a face in the streets, or in a carriage in the parks, which has dwelt in our recollection from its expression of more than common mental anguish, and we have prayed that our common Father may take pity on that unknown brother or sister, and send them Him who is emphatically called the Comforter. Perhaps such prayers have been said for us erewhile, and drawn down upon us some secret blessings.

Edgar and his wife looked weary and harassed when they reached Lowndes Square that day, only just in time for the family dinner. It was a long evening to get through, especially without work or music. Edgar went out in the evening, and did not come home till late. After Ita had gone to her room she heard him come in and open the door of his mother's dressing-room. In a

few minutes he came to her and said, "I have decided to go to Holmwood early to-morrow morning, but I have told my mother that you will remain here, at any rate, two or three days longer; that you have some business to do in London . . . . It is a dreadful business, Ita!" He turned away, and leant his head on his hand, his arm resting on the mantelpiece.

She took his hand, and pressed it to her lips. He did not withdraw it, but said, "I have not yet given up all hope. If I followed my own wish and impulse, I would carry you away with me, and shut you up in my own home far from all possibility of accomplishing your terrible resolution. But I have taken advice from one I love and respect; I told him that the thought of this separation drives me wild . . . ."

Ita turned pale; she did not know in what sense he used the word separation, and did not dare ask him. After a pause he added, "I am advised not to use compulsion; not forcibly to control your actions . . . . So be it . . . . I cannot see it myself. If you were on the border of a precipice I would

snatch you from it . . . . but I am not fit to judge of my duty in this respect. Only remember I protest against the step you are about to take. I think it wrong altogether . . . . However, this is what I meant to say, what I have a right to insist upon. Here are the directions of two clergymen whom you are well acquainted with by name—one is Dr. ——, the other Mr. ——. They are both in London at this moment. Dr. —— can see you to-morrow at twelve; Mr. —— will be at home all the afternoon. I earnestly wish you to converse with both of them before you take the final step. They will put the truth before you far better than I can, and will show you the fatal consequences of your present delusion. In the meantime I shall wait and pray; when you can relieve me from this terrible suspense you will write, and then . . . . but I am sure it is impossible that you can decide to leave our Church."

"I have told you, dearest Edgar, that it must be so."

"How can you tell till you have spoken to these holy and learned men? Why are you determined to break my heart? and your

own too," he added, as he saw the look of misery on her face.

"They can only say to me what you have done. It is not as if I had not heard the arguments and read the books on your side of the question, and as if I had not striven with all my might against the opposite conviction. I will go to them, however, I will hear all they can urge. If they could convince me I should bless them as long as I live."

"You do not then *wish* to be a Roman Catholic?"

"I only wish it because I believe the Roman Catholic Church is the only true one. I must wish to do God's will, even if it makes me miserable."

"His will is that a wife should cleave to her husband," Edgar exclaimed.

Ita felt deeply pained; she was grieved that Edgar should use such an argument as that—should employ such sophistry. It was unlike him, unworthy of him. She sighed deeply, and leaving his side, went and seated herself at some distance in deep dejection. Then he exclaimed wildly—

"What, and if you shake in me *all* faith? I assure you that at this moment I do not feel as if I believed in anything."

"It is terrible," Ita murmured; "but it will pass away." After a pause, she said, "Edgar, if I was to say to you now—'My convictions are exactly the same as they were an hour ago; I am just as certain as ever that I ought to be a Roman Catholic; I have no faith in the teaching of any of the various parties in the Church of England, and cannot rely on the validity of her Sacraments; but I will give up caring for truth at all, I will go with you to Holmwood to-morrow, and enjoy this present life without troubling my head at all about religion,'—would this please you?—would you be satisfied with such a resolution?"

Edgar made no reply to this question.

"Well, go and see Dr. —— and Mr. ——. I will not say anything more; I will try not even to think about it till I hear the result."

The next morning he left London by an early train. It was almost the first time Ita

had been parted from him for more than one day. She felt anxious and depressed, but prepared to fulfil her promise to him. Mrs. Langdon was slightly indisposed. She accordingly told Ita she would not go out, and placed her brougham at her disposal. Soon after breakfast the following note from Eliza arrived by the post:—

"Dearest Ita,—I went yesterday to see the poor Italian woman you mentioned to me. She had just returned home. I did not think she seemed in great distress, at least comparatively speaking. She anxiously inquired if you were still in London, and said she had a particular reason for wishing to see you. She asked me to tell you so. Do you think you could find time to pay her a short visit before you go? The Rev. Mr. Discoll has been with her, one of our priests, and he begged me to urge you to comply with her request. I am sure, my own dear, kind friend, that you will be glad to hear that my husband met yesterday an old acquaintance of his, who hopes to obtain for him regular employment—something not too

fatiguing. 'Vous nous avez porté bonheur,' as French people say.—Ever affectionately yours, "E. Roland."

It was just eight o'clock that day when Ita walked into Mrs. Roland's little sitting-room. She had dined in the middle of the day, had some tea at six, and told Mrs. Langdon she should not return home till late in the evening. Both the windows were open, but little air came in. She took off her bonnet and shawl, and sat down opposite her friend with a countenance that did not at once tell its own story. Eliza saw that it expressed emotion, but did not make out at first what sort of emotion it was. But when Ita suddenly rose and threw her arms round her neck, and said, "Wish me joy," she exclaimed, "Have you been received into the Church?"

"Not yet," Ita answered, "but I have seen a Catholic priest, Father ——, and to-morrow I am to be received. I have written to my husband to say so."

"Oh, dearest, God bless you, God help you!" Eliza exclaimed.

"He has, He does help me wonderfully. I am so thankful that I did what Edgar wished —I mean about seeing two Anglican clergymen, whom he told me to go to. It so entirely settled my mind. I had really no doubts before; but if the shadow of one had remained, those conversations would have dispelled it."

"How so. Tell me what happened."

"I went first this morning to Dr. ——. I suppose he is a clever man—people say he is. First, he began by repeating the usual arguments in favour of Anglicanism, which made no impression upon me, as I have heard them over and over again, and they always strike me as quite inconclusive. But I was a little impressed by the awful things he said as to the presumption and danger of judging for oneself on a subject of such importance. He used very solemn words, and spoke of the great sin committed by those who, after having had opportunities of witnessing the workings of grace in the Church of England, by a deliberate act declare their belief that her Sacraments are invalid, and her minis-

trations void. He went so far as to assert that such persons were guilty of the sin against the Holy Ghost."

Eliza smiled, and Ita quickly added, "I did not believe this for one moment, though the absurdity of the assertion did not strike me then as forcibly as afterwards. But it made me nervous. He adjured me to pause on the brink of the precipice. He told me he would answer for the salvation of my soul at God's judgment-seat, if I remained in the Church of England; but that he trembled for my safety, if I dared to leave her. Indeed, he did not see how such an act could find pardon. All this, and the idea that it was possible I was making Edgar so unhappy, without necessity, caused me, for an instant, to waver. He assured me that Satan had transformed himself into an angel of light to deceive and beguile me from the Church of my baptism. That expression reminded me of my Catholic conditional baptism. What he was saying told both ways in my case, and, perhaps, most on the side he would have deprecated. But I own I was somewhat shaken. He seemed so thoroughly convinced himself, and I sup-

pose at such a time, that that always has some effect upon one. I said something about seeing him again before leaving London; and during the following three hours vague thoughts of the possibility of delaying the final step kept passing through my mind."

Eliza was listening with the deepest interest to her friend's account of this interview. She had herself gone through the same agitations, only in a still more prolonged and intense form. Her belief in the Catholicity of the Church of England had been of such long standing, and so deeply rooted, and her aversion to Roman Catholicism in consequence so decided, that to remove the one, and conquer the other, had been a terrible struggle. She waited impatiently for Ita's next words.

"In the afternoon, at the appointed time, I went to Edgar's other friend. Do you know Mr. —— ?"

"Not to speak to; I have heard him preach."

"Edgar and others had often said to me, that his singular piety and holiness were evidences of the sanctity that the Church of England can exhibit; that it showed how

her teaching and her means of grace could train a soul in the highest virtue; and I must say he does look very very good. Well, he received me most kindly, and, after a little preliminary conversation, said that he understood that my mind was unsettled and dissatisfied with the Church of England.

"'More than unsettled—more than dissatisfied,' I replied; 'I have no faith at all in it as a Church. I am quite convinced that if our Lord has a visible Church on earth, to whom He has committed the teaching of religious truth to men, it can only be the Church of Rome. Intellectually, I cannot doubt this, but . . . .' I paused for a moment, and then added, 'I had determined, at the price of a sacrifice, greater I think almost than life itself, to act up to this belief, but . . . .' I again paused.

"'But what?' he asked.

"'But if it is possible that it is the devil who has put this thought into my mind, I must—though it seems to me like stifling the voice of conscience—I must make a desperate effort to drive it away . . . .'

"He did not speak for a moment, and then

he said, in a low, impressive voice, 'But if, on the other hand, it should have been an inspiration of the Holy Ghost?'

"I was so surprised, that I gazed on him without uttering. He went on, 'Do not misunderstand me. I am satisfied, myself, to remain in the Church of England. Indeed, I should think it very wrong, with my present convictions, and believing that God has given me a work to do in the communion in which his providence has placed me, to think of abandoning my post, and the charge committed to me. But, at the same time, I cannot shut my eyes to the fact that there are souls which seem imperatively called to the Roman Communion—whether, as I fully believe to have been the case in one remarkable instance, the prayers of Roman Catholics obtain for their own portion of our Lord's vineyard labourers, of which we were not worthy—or that, in some cases, there is an absolute need of special means of grace and spiritual aids more abundantly found in the sister Church than in our own. If the convictions you speak of are of long standing—if your present intention has been carefully

weighed and considered on your knees before God—if, as I believe is the case, it apparently involves the sacrifice of a great portion, if not of all your earthly happiness, and still you do not doubt that you are called to make that sacrifice, I cannot, I dare not pronounce that God has not inspired it.'

"'Your husband laid before me last night the circumstances which seem to have brought you to this conclusion, a sad one for him, and admitted how gradual has been your approach to it. He came to me again this morning on his way to the station, and I told him, as I now tell you, that I dare not form or pronounce a judgment on this point. I cannot say to you, "leave us," yet I dare not say, "remain," if you feel really bound in conscience to join the Church of Rome. I may regret it, but I cannot blame you for acting up to that conviction.'

"Oh, Eliza, I shall always be grateful to the man who said those words. Edgar had told me he was one of the best and most pious clergymen in the Anglican Church, and had urged his holiness as one of the arguments against leaving it, and now I found

that this good man did not dare to blame or detain one who thought of abandoning her communion. From that moment doubt was no longer possible, not even that transient hesitation which had passed over my soul like a cloud over the sunshine. Here were two leaders of that fraction of the Church of England that calls itself the Catholic Church in this country, that small sub-division of Anglicanism that professes Catholicism, divided on a point vital to its existence. The intention of leaving her communion is, in the opinion of one of these leaders, without any doubt, a suggestion of the devil, and, according to the other, may be an inspiration of the Holy Ghost. All other differences seem little compared to this. Some may teach us to believe in Transubstantiation, and others in Consubstantiation. Some advise us to say the Hail Mary, others to abstain from it, or only say one-half of it. But even all this cannot be compared with the doubt in which opposite views as to Secession must leave the soul if they do not at once resolve it in one way. All uncertainty for the second and last time vanished from my soul, and perplexity,

after all the worst of trials, is for ever at an end."

"And you went to Father —— ?"

"Yes, but first I wrote to Edgar to tell him the result of my two interviews, and my resolution to be received at once into the Church, if the priest I was going to see thought me sufficiently instructed. I felt that as Edgar was prepared for this announcement, it was better to do it at once, and now my future fate is in his hands."

The deep flush which had coloured Ita's cheeks while she was speaking, subsided, and an ashy paleness succeeded to it. She bowed her head on her hands, and remained silent. Eliza was feeling intensely for her, but it was not a moment for many words. English reserve is never more conspicuous than in those hours when two hearts are full, one of strong emotion, the other of ardent sympathy, and the feelings find no expression but in what sounds like cold questions and answers, or casual remarks.

"And Father —— agreed to receive you into the Church ?" Eliza asked.

"Yes, I had a long conversation with him,

and when he found I had carefully studied the Catechism, and had no doubts or difficulties, after giving me some instructions, he decided to receive me into the Church to-morrow. He thought that, under the circumstances, it would be better not to put it off any longer. He knows a great deal about me from Mrs. Sydney and Mr. Neville."

"And when are you going to him for that purpose?"

"At half-past ten."

"Shall I meet you there?"

"No, dearest. I think I would rather go alone."

"How long do you think you shall stay in London?"

"It will depend on what I hear from Edgar. I asked if I might go to him on Wednesday. God knows what his answer will be! I do not know if he means me to go home. I live as in a dream. I had not been a whole day away from him since our marriage. It is as if one of us had died suddenly. I do not feel as if I was in the same world as before. On Wednesday morning I hope to receive Holy Communion

—that long-desired blessing — and then strengthened by that grace to go home— or . . . ."

Ita could not finish the sentence. Tears choked her voice. At that moment Mr. Roland came in. She wrung his hand, kissed Eliza, and hurried away. Half way down the stairs she stopped, and, turning round, said—

"By the way, I will try and see that poor woman to-morrow. If I come here about three o'clock, perhaps you will go there with me?"

"Certainly," Eliza answered. "She seems very anxious to see you."

CHAPTER XIII.

When Ita arrived in Lowndes Square she found her mother-in-law rather discomposed at her having been out all day. "What a great amount of shopping and visiting you must have been doing, my dear," she said. "You look fagged to death. I am so sorry you sent the brougham away this afternoon. I hate your going about so much in cabs, and am always afraid of your catching something. Have you had some tea?"

"Yes, thank you, dear Mrs. Langdon. I had some before I went out the last time. I am afraid I have given a great deal of trouble."

"Oh dear no, my love; giving trouble is not one of your failings. I know no one who is so little troublesome in a house. But I

hope you take enough care of yourself. Have you seen the Rolands to-day?"

"Yes, I am just come from them."

"Jane was here this afternoon. She was quite disappointed not to find you at home. She wanted to talk to you about Eliza. She is very unhappy about her."

"Is she?"

"Yes. She says the thought of her position is never out of her mind, and that she cannot help feeling very angry with Mr. Roland. She does not think it honourable in a man to marry a girl like her sister, and then reduce her to beggary, leaving the burden of supporting them on her relatives."

Mr. Langdon looked up from his newspaper and asked, "Do they support them?"

"No, I suppose not; but it is always an uncomfortable feeling, you know, that a near relative is actually in distress. It is so difficult to know what to do."

"That is the worst of those changes in religion. Religion was meant to bring peace and comfort on earth; and really it seems now to be always causing divisions and misery."

Ita opened a Bible that was lying on the table and read aloud the following verses from the Gospel of St. Luke, 12th chapter, "'Think ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, No, but separation: for there shall be from henceforth five in one house divided, three against two, and two against three. The father shall be divided against the son, and the son against the father; the mother against the daughter, and the daughter against her mother; the mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.' This does not seem, dear Mrs. Langdon, to promise constant peace and comfort of the kind you speak of."

Mrs. Langdon reddened, and answered, "I really think, my dear Margaret, that you might read your Bible to a better purpose than to select such texts as these."

"And who is to choose for her the texts she is to study?" Mr. Langdon remarked. "I thought good Protestants were to 'search the Scriptures,' and learn all they could for themselves?"

"But you know Edgar says we are not

Protestants," his wife rejoined. She had always an answer ready for the difficulty placed before her, but did not care much for its relation to the particular point in question.

"Oh, I had forgotten that," Mr. Langdon said, and returned to his leading article.

She went on in her particularly wise tone, "I am sure St. Paul speaks of a peace which passeth all understanding, and that makes up for the other texts."

Perhaps Mr. Langdon thought his wife's folly passed all understanding. If they had been alone he might have said so; but he did not like to make those sort of remarks before Ita, and therefore said nothing.

"Jane asked me," Mrs. Langdon said, "if it was true that the Rolands are trying to convert you. I said I could not believe anything so bad of them."

"Would it be wrong, seeing what they believe themselves?"

"It would be horribly ungrateful to Edgar who has been so kind to them."

"It depends, does it not, on what they

think is truth," Ita answered, with an inward writhing under these remarks.

"Oh, come, my dear, it is all very well to speak of truth; but that sort of thing leads to all sorts of harm and misery. It is a great pity where people are carried away with false ideas of conscience. There ought, I think, to be a law to prevent persons from changing their religion."

"Well done, Mrs. Langdon, I advise you to take up that question," Mr. Langdon exclaimed. "You had better recommend the revival of the penal laws. Suppose you convert your friend, Mrs. Flashbourne, to that view. The next time she takes the Chair at the meeting for the Rights of Women, she might hold forth upon it. Mrs. Derwent, are you a Rights of Women woman?"

Ita smiled, and answered that she felt rather uncharitably towards the champions of her sex, and ungrateful to the politicians who take up their cause.

As they were going upstairs, Mrs. Langdon said to her daughter-in-law, "You know, my dear, we are only too happy to keep

you, but I cannot be so selfish as to want you to stay away from Edgar."

As this amounted to an inquiry as to how long she was going to remain, Ita answered, "I shall leave you, dear Mrs. Langdon, the day after to-morrow."

"Oh, really! so soon as that; but I must not be selfish. Only, you know, of course, how glad we are to have you."

As Ita closed the door of her room, she thought, "Where shall I be on Wednesday evening?"

By the middle of the following day she was a Catholic. That great change—the greatest that can happen in this world—had taken place in her soul and in her life. Where it is the result of deliberate, earnest, disinterested conviction, the peace which follows this great act is generally in proportion with the suffering which has preceded it. In each case the amount of this suffering has and will vary. Sometimes it vanishes all at once, and for ever, when the threshold of our new home is passed, and the weary struggle is at an end. Sometimes the beauty, the symmetry of the temple we have entered,

the harmony of its parts, and the glory of its light, bursts upon the mind and entrances the soul from the first moment the door is opened; or else, like the magnificence of its earthly image, St. Peter's shrine at Rome, it breaks upon us by slow degrees, gradually winning its way into our hearts, and, at last, with cords of love, binding us to its altars. The mode in which we approach, the mood in which we enter, the spirit which we carry into the church, influences in a measure these differences. The associations of the past, the more or less strong attachment we have felt for the forms of worship used in childhood and in youth, the amount of our previous familiarity with those of the religion we embrace, our early sympathies, and our natural tastes, the timidity or the boldness of our characters, the friends we leave behind or those we join—all modify in various ways the mere natural feelings connected with this great change. To some, the last effort is perfect agony. They have reached a point from whence they cannot recede, for neither faith nor reason can find a standing-ground anywhere but in humble

submission to a living and teaching Church; but the fainting soul recoils from entering an unknown spiritual world, and shudders on the brink of the decisive act. Death would seem a relief, if it was not the very thought of death that presses on them the necessity of a decision on a point which involves the interests of eternity. To those who thus feel, we can only say the three words with which St. Peter brought his brother to our Lord—"Come and see."

There are others whose trial has extended over a lengthened period of time, and whose greatest suffering was the unsatisfied yearning after their true spiritual mother. Silently, by degrees, they drew near to her bosom, and, when received into the fold, felt like children going home. It is no unknown, dark region they enter. They always heard at intervals gentle accents calling them onward. They have not to regain the faculty of sight and slowly learn to appreciate the treasures of their recovered inheritance. In their case, it is as if the veil was simply drawn aside, and they quietly take their place in the arms of their mother.

This was Ita's case. Her joy was calm and deep, and her soul at rest.

We seldom picture to ourselves any moment of our future lives exactly as it afterwards turns out. Things may be sadder or brighter—more painful or more pleasant than we expect, but very seldom just what we imagined that they would be. Thus it was with Ita's return to Holmwood, for she did return there on the day after she had been received into the Catholic Church. Whilst they were abroad, she had at first often thought with delight of the pleasure it would be to arrive there and find herself again in the lovely little home where she and Edgar had spent two happy years. Later on, ever since his illness, and especially after their return to England, she had pictured to herself this return—if, indeed, she was to go back there at all—as fraught with great suffering. At last the long-thought-of day was come, and though anxious and more and more nervous as the journey drew to an end, she was not as unhappy as she had anticipated. On the Wednesday morning the first post had brought her a note from her

husband, which only contained these words:—

"My dear Ita,—If you still wish to come here to-morrow, you had better do so. I will send the pony-chaise to meet you at six o'clock. If you have changed your mind, telegraph to say so.—Your affectionate,

"E. Derwent."

She was not then banished from his home. "Thank God," she mentally exclaimed; but the brevity and commonplace style of his note gave her a sort of fear that possibly he had not received her letter. They had spoken of her following him in two or three days. Did he merely write with that idea? She remembered all the strong expressions he had used with regard to his line of duty if she became a Catholic. How he had said that it would be impossible for an Anglican clergyman to exercise his ministry with a wife by his side, whose religion would be a constant condemnation of his own, a daily protest against his position, and a denial of his orders. She could hardly believe he

had changed his opinion on that point, and could hardly brook the suspense of the intervening hours. The prospect of again seeing Mrs. Gerald and Annie also agitated her. So many new strange ideas connected with them had occupied her mind since she had been parted from them. On the very eve of that day, a singular confirmation of previous doubts had unexpectedly occurred. Just after she had been received into the Church, and while longing to rest her mind wholly on the fulness of the blessing she had received, and the happiness she looked forward to on the following morning, the performance of a charitable duty that afternoon had led to strange complications in the line of conscience and duty, and produced many an anxious thought about the future. She at once longed and dreaded the moment of arrival.

At last, the station but one to that of Holmwood was reached. Then the train rushed across the common from whence the little church and village of Bramblemoor could be seen. That view reminded her of the winter three years before, with all its

pains and pleasures. Then at last the woods of Holmwood came in sight. Then the western grove—then the first glimpse of the old house amidst the trees; the train slackened its pace, the whistle of the driver was heard, and she gave an eager glance at the platform to see if Edgar was there. Yes, he was standing looking out for her. He helped her out of the carriage, put her arm in his, and smiled kindly, though she fancied with effort. They drove through the park to the Vicarage speaking very little. All that passed between them were questions and answers about Mrs. Gerald's health, Annie's looks, and so on. Ita thought him pale, and felt that his manner was constrained. This was very painful to her. She could not look at anything with pleasure, though it was their favourite sunset hour, and the lawn, and the trees, and the shrubbery were in the greatest beauty. She had longed for the journey to be over. Now she longed for the drive to be ended. As they walked from the gate of their garden to the door of their house, she asked if Mrs. Gerald wished to see her that evening.

"She did wish it, and had almost insisted upon it," Edgar answered, "but Annie would not hear of your seeing her to-night. She said it would over-excite my aunt, and prevent her sleeping."

"And Annie herself?"

"She does not want you to go to her till to-morrow."

Ita felt pained. She had been absent nearly a year, and Annie did not care to see her till the next day! But then she remembered that embarrassment, and perhaps resentment, might account for this wish to delay their meeting.

She went into the little drawing-room, and stood at the window. The garden was now the prettiest thing that could be seen. Annie had made all sorts of improvements in it. There was a perfect blaze of flowers; some rather large trees had been transplanted, with much labour and taste, and others cut down so as to make the views of distant country still more lovely; a little French parterre, with a very pretty fountain in the centre of it, was added on one side of the cottage, and took the place of the old kitchen-garden,

which had been removed to the other side of the road.

Some new pieces of furniture made the rooms more comfortable and cheerful-looking than ever. Ita looked about her, scarcely believing she was there again. It seemed as if they had been such ages away. Edgar came and stood by her. She leant her head on his shoulder. He stooped and kissed her forehead. She could not endure not to make sure he had received her last letter.

"You heard from me this morning?" she said. "You know it is done?"

"Yes," he answered; "and I have made up my mind what to do."

She looked up into his face, her heart beating violently. She had a hope and a fear, but neither of them were to be realized. She did not guess what he meant.

"I will tell you this evening what I have resolved," he said. "There is the dressing bell. Had you not better go and get ready?"

When they left their little dining-room Ita led the way into the garden. The light was waning, and a heavy dew beginning to

fall. Edgar wanted to get a shawl for her; but she was afraid of his staying out, and they went back to the library, and sat by the bay-window. Both were afraid to speak, but both felt that silence was intolerable, and attempts at conversation still worse. At last she said, "Dearest Edgar, I know how grieved you are at what I have done, and it is very good of you to be so kind to me. May I speak to you about it? May I tell you what I feel?"

He answered gently but coldly, "Of course I know you would not have taken this step if you had not considered yourself bound in conscience to do so. It is of no use to lament over what is irrevocable. We must bear it as well as we can, since it is our fate to inflict pain on each other. I am particularly sorry for Annie; she is broken-hearted about it. The suffering falls on her as well as on ourselves . . . ."

"I do not quite understand what you mean. I do not see how it affects her happiness."

"You do not suppose, my love, that I am going to remain here, as the clergyman

of this place, under the present circumstances?"

The colour rushed into Ita's cheek, and she trembled with emotion. "Are you then thinking? . . . . Oh, Edgar, is there any hope?"

"Not one atom of what you would call hope. Oh no, I should not have suffered the anguish I have gone through since yesterday if the shadow of a doubt had crossed my mind. If I had not felt that all my happiness and usefulness are at an end, in consequence of the step you have thought it right to take. But I do not reproach you. I have resolved on my knees not to say an unkind word to you. I will endure the trial God has sent me. Life is, after all, short . . . ."

Violence and anger would have been easier to bear than these mournful words. There was a dejection in Edgar's voice and manner which pierced his wife's heart. It was a keen and heavy trial. She guessed now what he intended to do, and asked, in a faltering voice, "But, feeling this, do you consider yourself obliged to give up the living?"

"I have done so to-day. I have written to the bishop to say I resign it. You may imagine what Annie feels about it!"

There was a silence of some minutes, and then he said, with a poor attempt at cheerfulness, "And now there is nothing to do but to pack up and fix on some cheap place to live in, where we may both practise our different religions."

Poor Ita! She sat staring at the sky, in which the stars were beginning to appear, one by one, motionless and mute, but with a rush of tumultuous thoughts, filling her mind with strange confusion. It was not her who was banished by Edgar. She was not, apparently, to be the chief sufferer; but what refined misery it was to be made the instrument of his suffering! For the second time she had, as it were, severed him from his beloved Holmwood. The praise of the woman who had done good and not evil to her husband all the days of his life seemed, in that hour of morbid wretchedness, reversed in her case. She was always ruining his destiny; always standing between him and happiness. Not even in that exquisitely painful moment

did she regret having become a Catholic—for those who have once really embraced that faith, it would be an impossibility; but she looked further back. She inwardly exclaimed, "Why did I marry him? why did I show him I loved him? why did I come and thrust myself between him and Annie? His life was full of promise at that time. Wealth, this beautiful place, and the love of a good woman were all offered to his acceptance. He had accepted them, and then I, a nameless, penniless girl, came with my poor, wretched attractions, and ruined all his prospects. I, a stranger to them." Then through her mind, like a falling star on a dark night, rushed the thought that perhaps . . . .

Oh, what a strange one it was at that moment! "Who knows," she mused, "that a mysterious Providence is not overruling our destinies, and, as Shakespeare says, 'Shaping our ends, rough hew them as we will.' Who knows that the secret of my own birth is not about to be discovered, and that God is not working out his will for us through all this misery!"

One can fancy a person tossed to and fro

on a heaving sea, and struggling to find his way to the land, resolving in very helplessness to lie still on the waves looking up to the sky, trusting that they may waft him to the shore and finding peace in that helplessness. So felt Ita that evening. While Edgar sorted papers and looked over the contents of his boxes, she worked at a piece of tapestry, begun before they had gone abroad. The half-finished flowers were somewhat faded. The colour had passed away from them, and so had joy and brightness from their lives. "And yet, my God!" she murmured, "yet, my God, we both wish to love and serve Thee!"

Alas! that peculiar trial of our time, its harassing divisions, its miserable doubts, are they not the fulfilment of the prophecy that the sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children? If three hundred years ago the standard of rebellion had not been raised against the Church, not so many aching hearts would be asking now, "What is truth?" and turning away from the reply; not so many sentences would go forth in this land, condemning to poverty and banishment from

their peaceful homes, men too honest to act a lie; kindred hearts would not be so often severed, nor happy homes be broken up.

Ita was very tired, and left the library early. She went away with the consciousness that every kind word her husband had spoken since she had arrived—that his endurance of her caresses, his silence as to his sorrow, had been immense efforts achieved by dint of powerful self-control. Was it pride or virtue that sustained him? Possibly a mixture of both. Ita ascribed it, and perhaps she was right, to pure virtue, and believed God would bless him for his goodness. When she rested her weary head on her hands that night to say her prayers, she remembered when and where she had offered to suffer far, far more than she had yet done to obtain his life and his conversion. This thought gave her strength. The greater her trial, the more right she had to hope.

At breakfast, the following morning, she timidly proposed to go and see Mrs. Gerald. Edgar said he would walk there with her. They crossed the lawn and shrubbery in

almost total silence. The strong perfume of the heliotrope which grew in rich abundance all over the place, the sound of the many little streams flowing across the grounds, the cawing of the rooks, the feeling of the soft moss under her feet, the familiar, homelike walk across the grove and the parterre, had not the same charm as usual. The loveliness of the whole scene was fraught with pain.

Edgar opened the garden door of the library, and led the way to the recess where Annie was sitting. She jumped up when she saw them, and her eyes fixed themselves on Ita with a stern and troubled expression. She submitted to her embrace, and then said in a cold formal manner, "My aunt wishes very much to see you, so you had better go to her at once."

Ita made a violent effort to restrain her tears, and left the room without speaking.

Mrs. Gerald was not yet dressed, and she sat down in the sitting-room to wait for her. Before her eyes were the curtained pictures; those pictures she had never seen but once. An impetuous desire seized her to look again

at those portraits. It was such a new feeling had sprung up in her heart since the words, "My father and my mother" had secretly risen to her lips. A blank in her past life seemed filled up by that vision of a love that had once been felt for her—a love like no other love. The forms of unknown parents no longer rose before her like dim shadows; and since she had been a Catholic, one of her joys was to name them in her prayers for the holy souls departed.

She went up to the side of the room where those pictures were, and softly lifted up the curtain. There it was, that face, so beautiful and so innocent, which people said was like her own; and that little baby in its mother's arms. Had she been really that happy little child, closely pressed to that loving heart? As she stood gazing on it she could almost fancy she felt a mother's kiss on her brow and on her cheeks, but the sound of an opening door made her suddenly drop the curtain.

Mrs. Gerald came in with a feeble step. She was led to her arm-chair and sunk into it before she saw Ita. When she did perceive

her she tried to speak, but the effort failed. Ita fell down on her knees before her with her face hidden on her lap; their hearts were full, and they both wept in silence. At last Ita looked up, and then Mrs. Gerald stooped and kissed her, and held her face between her hands gazing upon it, and pressed her lips on her hair and then smoothed it with her thin, trembling hands. When they both became more composed, Ita inquired about her health. Mrs. Gerald gave a bad account of it, but quickly changed the subject. "This has been a very unfortunate step you have taken," she then said in a nervous manner; "it has created much misery and complicated everything."

"God knows I would not care so much what I suffered if it was not for others. The hardest trial of all is to have obliged Edgar to leave Holmwood. I could almost better have endured to have been driven from it alone as I once expected. And yet no . . . . after all he preferred me to Holmwood once before, and he loves me as much as ever, I think. I am very sorry for Annie, and so grieved, so very grieved to leave you. I

have been a misery to you ever since I came here."

"It has all been very strange, but God's will, I suppose. I could wish to have been spared this last trial . . . . I wonder . . . ." she stopped and her mouth quivered . . . . "I wonder if you have ever guessed what I feel about you?"

The colour rushed into Ita's face, and her heart beat violently. "I always have thought that you cared for me more than you said."

"I wish to leave Holmwood—I want to go to my cottage by the seaside. I want you to come with me. There is a Roman Catholic chapel there. Edgar could spare you for a little while. I think it would be better for both of you just now."

"I do not think he could do without me. At all events, at this moment I could not propose to leave him. If he wished me to do so I would certainly go with you. But then, Annie?"

"I am of no use or comfort to her now. I am grown so irritable. My nerves are shattered, and she does not understand that sort of suffering. My waywardness has

estranged her. She never loved me as I loved her, and now . . . . but it is of no use discussing that . . . . Edgar is really better I hope? though so much out of spirits."

"Yes, thank God. He is much better, but I am anxious as to the effect upon him of all he has and is going through. Oh, that I could have spared it him!" as she murmured those last words Ita's hands were passionately clasped together.

"That is what Annie fears; that he will be ill again. She was wild about it yesterday, but it is of no use telling you that; you must try and soften her."

"Has she made any new friends since we have been away?"

"Not one. Mrs. Sydney and the Carsdales have tried to get on with her, and invited her very often; but instead of becoming more like other people, she seems to try and keep every one at a distance. Her only amusement is working in the garden and improving the place. That is her passion, but when she heard that Edgar had resigned the living, her first words were, 'Then I

shall shut up the house and go away.' I am always afraid of her taking some strange line of her own. She is so unlike other girls."

At that moment Edgar came in to say that he was obliged to go home. He whispered to his wife, who had followed him to the door, "Annie will not speak to me. It is a wretched state of things; you must try and force her out of her reserve."

After a little more conversation with Mrs. Gerald, Ita took leave of her. As she was crossing the room she perceived a letter on the table directed to Mrs. Dallas. This was the name of the person who had written to the priest at Colla to inquire about the time when she had been found by Piombo. A whole train of agitating thoughts rushed into her mind, but she had no time to dwell on them now. When she went into the library no one was there. Annie had gone into the garden. She followed her down one of the alleys, and met her turning back, upon which she exclaimed, "Dearest Annie! you *must* speak to me."

"What is the use of speaking?" Annie

abruptly answered, "I can say nothing you will like to hear."

"Anything would be better than this silent anger."

"Do you call it anger?"

"I am afraid you are angry with me."

"I wish you no harm. I hope you never will be as unhappy as I am."

"Oh, Annie, do you think I do not suffer?"

"Perhaps you do. I dare say you think so, but you have your new faith to support you; you consider yourself a martyr; and when you see Edgar unhappy, you comfort yourself by hoping he will be one day a Catholic, and that makes up for it."

Ita scarcely knew what to say. She was struck with the hard but mournful expression of Annie's countenance, but her next words took her by surprise.

"God only knows the misery you have caused me! I have never complained. I have never let any one know what I have suffered. From the time I was a little child I have loved Edgar. Yes, I can say so though he is your husband, for if ever there was a pure honest love it has been mine for

him. I never had but one wish, but one care, and that was to make him happy. I was afraid for some time of marrying him, lest I should not be the sort of person he could most love. I am not clever like him, I have not all his high thoughts; but I wanted to give him everything I had, and so I resolved to be his wife, and as good a one as I could. Then you came and I saw he was getting to care for you as he would never have cared for me, and I gave him up to you . . . ."

Here Annie broke down. The strong heart gave way, and a torrent of burning tears flowed down her cheeks. Ita sank down on a bench, and hid her face in her hands.

"Yes, I gave him up to you and I was happy that he was happy. I lived in the thought that I could still use for him all I possessed, and work for you both, and make your home a pleasant one. When he was ill I thanked God that you were his wife, because you have gentle, soothing ways, and a sweet voice, and all the outside tenderness I have not. It was enough for me to see him writing or reading in his snug room, or sitting

with you under the shade in the garden I had made so pretty, and to think he still loved Holmwood, and enjoyed it, and belonged to it. I made no friends but you both, and did not want any others."

"Dearest Annie, we both love you so dearly."

"I tell you, Ita, that you were bound to make him happy. If ever a woman was bound to make her husband happy, it was you. That was the only proof of affection you could have given me, and instead of that you have made him miserable. Never shall I forget finding him with your letter in his hand—his poor eyes almost blinded with tears—his hand feverish and burning. You have broken his heart; you have driven him from Holmwood. Look at this place he loves so much; think of the poor people here; it is your own doing that he leaves them. No, no; it is too bad, too cruel, too hard. God forgive me, but I cannot forgive you."

She darted off, snatching her hand away from Ita, who was trying to detain her. The effort had ill succeeded; she would have

to tell Edgar of its failure. When she went home, and into her bed-room, the want of some mechanical occupation made her begin to unpack her trunks. They would soon have to be again filled for another journey, she sorrowfully thought, but to be busy about anything at that moment was a relief. It happened that her eyes soon fell on the parcel on which she had written at Mentone, "My baby clothes." She could not help opening it, and looking again at the faded shawl, and at the initials A. D., and thinking what would be Mrs. Gerald's emotions if she were to show them to her. She would, perhaps, recognize that shawl; she would most likely know it again if it had been Mrs. Derwent's; and the sight of the night-gown, how it would astonish and agitate her. Much more connected with that subject had lately been revealed to her, but she had resolved for the present to leave the mystery in God's hands. It was not the time, she felt, to impart even to her husband the strong suspicions on her mind as to Annie's birth and her own; but it was a constant subject of thought. It had shot across her mind when,

in her transport of indignation, poor Annie had pointed to the beautiful scene before them, and the expression of her face, excited by powerful emotion, had at the same minute forcibly reminded her of Mariana's countenance. She remembered the day when the bereaved mother had searched for the mark on her shoulder, and turned away sighing because it was not there; and perhaps all the time Annie was bearing that mark. Perhaps some day, by accident, she might see it. What a moment that would be! It seemed so extraordinary to think that, in some sense, certainty was within her reach, and yet as practically unattainable as if removed beyond all possibility. She could never have brought herself to look for that mark; she would have felt as if she was doing something treacherous. What would come of it all? She hardly knew whether this mystery made her present trial lighter or heavier. Time would show.

CHAPTER XIV.

For a few days there was very little intercourse between Holmwood House and the Vicarage. Ita had caught a bad cold just after her arrival, and was obliged to keep her bed. There was, consequently, no question of her going to Mass on the first Sunday after her return, and to Edgar this felt like a reprieve. He was not sorry that this accidental circumstance had also prevented the necessity of being as much as usual at Holmwood House.

When Ita got better, she went again to see Mrs. Gerald, and that day the conversation turned on religion. The latter said, "There is one thing in your new religion . . . ."

"My *old* religion," Ita interrupted, with one of her smiles, which seemed always to

dispel the cloud on the careworn face of the invalid.

"Well, your old religion, if you will—that must be a great consolation—that power of speaking with the most perfect security in the Confessional, even of the most important secrets. I have heard people say that there is less insanity in Catholic than in Protestant countries. I should not wonder at it. The relief to the mind must be so great of disclosing harassing thoughts that may be preying upon it."

There was a pause. Ita always had observed that Mrs. Gerald, like many reserved people, opened more upon subjects when left to bring out her own thoughts, than if others chimed in with them, or tried to induce her to be communicative.

"I should have liked to hear your confession, Ita."

"Would you!" Ita exclaimed, with a smile.

"Yes; I should like to read into your mind, and that, I suppose, would be the nearest approach to it."

"I am not sure that it would. I might

have thoughts that I should never mention in confession. There is no necessity for speaking of everything that comes into our heads. We are only obliged to accuse ourselves of our sins."

"There might not be a necessity, but would it not often be a consolation to reveal one's anxieties?"

"Yes; especially if we wanted advice."

"Talking of advice—what would be your opinion on the following question? I know a person whose mother died a short time ago and left her a diamond necklace. I have very strong doubts and good reasons to doubt, though I am by no means certain of it, that the mother had no right to that necklace, that it belonged to her sister, and in that case her sister's daughter, who lives in Australia ought to have it. Now, am I bound to go to my friend and tell her my doubts, and advise her to examine into the matter."

"That is a sort of question," Ita answered, "which I should like to submit to a priest."

"Why more to a priest than to any other person?"

"Because they make a special study, I suppose, of these sort of difficult cases of conscience, and know what all good people have thought, and taught about them."

"But what do you think would be right in that case?"

"I am not sure."

"But think, and say something."

Mrs. Gerald fixed her eyes on Ita, who felt confused and afraid of seeming embarrassed, and just on that account blushed deeply.

"What *do* you think?" Mrs. Gerald, repeated, in a nervous manner, but without losing the authoritative self-possession which never deserted her even when most agitated.

"I suppose," Ita at last said, with a voice that shook a little, "that if you yourself had had nothing to do with the mistake that you would not be obliged to say anything about it?"

"No, I suppose not. That would, of course, make a great difference; but supposing I had been under an erroneous impression, and then had found out my mistake, or at

any rate was nearly convinced that I had been deceived?"

Ita could not help suspecting what was passing in Mrs. Gerald's mind, and felt a nervous apprehension of what might follow, and a great fear of committing herself by answering her questions. The present moment seemed to her the worst possible one for such a disclosure. For supposing that sufficient evidence could be adduced to prove that she, and not Annie, was Mrs. Gerald's niece, would it not be most distressing to her own feelings that this should take place at a time when Edgar was full of pity for Annie, and displeased with her. Would he not wish she had kept silence and not placed him in an embarrassing and painful position with regard to one to whom they both owed so much gratitude. There was a peculiarity in Ita's nature which does not always exist, even in good and amiable people, and that is a great generosity, the quality which makes a person shrink beyond everything from taking an unexpected advantage over another; from triumphing over any one, whether by reproaching a person for an unfortunate piece of

advice, or a failure of any sort, even from pushing an argument so far as to leave an adversary no loophole of escape. If somebody made in her presence an assertion in that confident manner, which, with many, provokes opposition, and she could disprove it by irrefragable evidence, it was to her an effort not a gratification to do so. She felt, therefore, the strongest shrinking from continuing a conversation which might have led Mrs. Gerald to a more direct expression of the misgiving that she could not help thinking existed in her mind. Yet she could not resist dwelling much afterwards on what had passed between them. The fact was that she herself had scarcely a doubt left on her mind that she was Robert Derwent's daughter, and that Annie was Mariana's child. On the afternoon of the day when she had been received into the Catholic Church in London, she had been with Eliza to see the woman who had spoken to her at the Anglican House of Charity. The latter had asked to be left alone with Ita, and after again asking her name, and ascertaining that she was married to the nephew of the Mr. and Mrs. Derwent,

who had perished in an accident at sea, off the coast near Genoa, twenty-two or three years ago. She told her that during her illness she had been much troubled in conscience by the knowledge that the rightful heir of that family was kept out of his inheritance through a mistake, which had placed in possession of it a person whom she felt certain was not the child of the persons in question.

"If the young lady who is called Miss Derwent were to die, would your husband be the next heir to the property?"

"He would," Ita answered, "supposing she died without children."

"Then," Madame Ranolfi exclaimed, "he is the lawful owner of it at this moment."

She then proceeded to give Ita the following explanations:—

"As I told you the other day, Signora, my husband and I kept the Hotel of the Gran Duca, in Florence, for several years after our marriage. Mr. and Mrs. Derwent, their little child, and their servants, stayed in our house for four or five months the last year of their lives. They sailed from Livorno for Genoa in the middle of the month of May.

I went with them to Livorno, and saw them on board the unhappy ship that took them to their death. A few days afterwards we heard of the dreadful accident, and a messenger came from Madame Gerald, to request that my husband and myself should come as quickly as possible to Genoa, to give evidence about the child that had been saved, and which was supposed to be Monsieur and Madame Derwent's child. I had been taken ill the day before, and, besides, it would have been impossible for both of us to have left home at the same time. So Ettore took with him Caterina, one of our housemaids, who had attended the rooms the Signori occupied, and knew the child very well. When he came back, of course, my first question was, 'Well, is it the poor Signora's baby that was saved?' '*Sicuro*,' he answered, '*sicuro*'; and that Caterina had been engaged by Madame Gerald as its nurse, and had gone with them to Nice. I knew this was what she wanted. She had been hoping and praying, before she went, that it might be the right child that had been saved, and that she should have the care of it. I asked Ettore if he was

quite certain it was the Signora's baby. There had been all the spring several little children in our house, and I do not think he knew very well one from the other. He laughed and said, 'Why do you bother about it. Babies of that age are all alike, I think; but could there be a doubt when the child had on a night-gown and cap Madame Gerald could swear to, and an A. and a D. upon them as plain as the nose on your face.' When he said this, a queer feeling came over me; for, look you, Signora, when I was on board the steamer with the poor lady, I had seen her take out of a box some of her child's clothes to give to a poor widow, who was going back with her child to her native place, somewhere on the Riviera. It had nothing but rags on, and that touched the lady's heart. Her maid said, I remember, 'Why, surely, ma'am, you are not going to give away one of Miss Annie's night-gowns, which Mrs. Gerald trimmed herself!' but she did, and would see it put on the child before she went to sleep. I think God will have taken her into Paradise for that good deed. But now you

see why I was troubled when Ettore said there could be no doubt on the matter, because of the clothes. I told him what I had seen, but it made him angry. He said it was all very well as it was. Madame Gerald was satisfied, and so was everybody. Most likely it was the right child. Indeed, he had no doubt about it. The Signora had given him a handsome sum for his trouble, and he was not going to disappoint her and unsettle her mind. He was a man who did not like trouble—an easy man, you know. I did not think much more about it myself. I had such a bustling, busy life of it at this time, that things went easily out of my head. I had no time to think, from year's end to year's end. But, five years afterwards, Caterina came to Florence in a bad state of health, and when she was dying she sent to speak to me. She was full of remorse at having sworn that the child was the lady's. When she heard the *padrone* take his oath that it was, she was frightened not to do the same; and then she wished to get the place. Her confessor told her she ought to make the truth known, and so she sent for me. But

what could I do? She said she had mentioned something about this to Madame Gerald before she had left England, but that she would not listen, and was so angry that that was the reason of her coming away, though people said it was because of her health. I was beginning to be in trouble then, and did not see her again. She died soon afterwards. We got into great difficulties, and went from place to place, after giving up our hotel. At last my husband died, poor man, and I came to London with an English lady. I have a daughter married to an Englishman. My health failed, and, from one thing to another, I fell into poverty. This London is a bad place for foreigners. I have sometimes thought of asking Madame Gerald for some assistance, but I am ashamed to do so."

Ita said she had only a few shillings to offer her, but she was welcome to them. Madame Ranolfi received them with a grateful smile, and then said, "I do not know what I ought to do. I am glad I have told you all this; but it is, perhaps, of no use. Now my husband is dead, and Caterina dead,

perhaps nobody would believe me. Do you think I ought to tell Madame Gerald? The priest I saw yesterday said, that unless I could bring forward some proofs of what I know, I should be careful how I disturbed the minds of several persons on this subject."

"I should think he was right," Ita answered, speaking more calmly than she felt. She could not resist saying, "And so it was my likeness to that poor Mrs. Derwent that made you wish to speak to me at the Home?"

"Yes; I was struck with it the moment you came into the room. Ettore used to say that she was like a *salice*, what you call in English a weeping willow. She had that sort of graceful figure on which a shawl hangs prettily, and a small long neck like yours, and soft brown eyes. Every one who saw her said she was *vezzosa* dear. Poor young Signora, I think she must have taken her baby with her to heaven!"

Everything that had been uttered during that interview had been carefully treasured up by Ita; but she had strictly abstained from saying a word herself which would have

confirmed Madame Ranolfi's belief, or induced her to communicate the facts she had stated to others. Her natural quickness made her perceive that at that distance of time it would be exceedingly difficult to disprove Annie's identity and establish her own, even supposing that those most concerned in the case should wish to do so. The whole business—and the existence of a doubt which might never be perfectly solved — would be still more harassing to Edgar than to herself. As to Mrs. Gerald, she could not judge how far her suspicions had gone, and, therefore, whether further evidence would be a relief, or an additional trial to her. It seemed to her best on the whole, and she was confirmed in this view by the opinion of Father ——, whom she consulted the next morning, to be passive in the matter—to leave it in God's hands, and neither advise nor dissuade Madame Ranolfi from communicating with Mrs. Gerald. It was rather an effort to keep this resolution; for if she should die without stating what she knew, her evidence would be buried with her. She reflected, however, that if the time to speak herself on the subject

should come, Edgar would always believe whatever she told him. As to its becoming a legal question, the thought did not enter her mind. After all Annie's generosity and kindness to them, she could not look forward to such a possibility. Since her return to Holmwood, all this had, of course, been constantly in her thoughts; but as it has already been said, it seemed the very worst moment to speak of it to her husband.

She began to regret her previous reserve. She wished she had insisted on communicating to him her suspicions at Mentone. It would not then have been so difficult to renew the subject, and mention this recent information. In the scene with Annie her heart had swelled a little with the consciousness of what she now believed ought to be their relative positions; but she felt herself too much blessed, too enviable in the possession of what Annie too had looked upon as the most precious of treasures—Edgar's love—even though at that moment a cloud obscured their happiness, to feel anything for her but a tender compassion. "If she had married him, and then this had come to my know-

ledge, I might have grudged her the possession of Holmwood. But charming and beautiful as Holmwood is, it is but a poor compensation for what I have deprived her of."

Then she was sometimes disturbed by the thought, that she was not justified in withholding this secret from Edgar. Indeed, it had been her confessor's advice that she should take the earliest convenient opportunity to disclose it to her husband. "If Annie should marry," she thought, "and this is more likely now that we shall be going away, and poor Mrs. Gerald not likely to live, it would not be fair to be silent unless I resolved to remain so for ever." Still, as Annie had certainly no such intention at present, there was no reason for hurrying the disclosure on that score. She vaguely resolved to say nothing till they had left Holmwood, but then to lose no time in speaking to Edgar.

When, in the course of the foregoing conversation with Mrs. Gerald, the latter had asked, "But suppose I had deceived myself?" the question had startled her. She

felt as if the crisis of her fate was suddenly come, and an instinctive wish to put it off. She had made no reply, and Mrs. Gerald had not pressed the question further.

Two days afterwards Ita received a letter from Madame Ranolfi, telling her she was in great distress, as her daughter was too poor to support her, and that she entreated her to lay her case before Mrs. Gerald, and solicit from her some assistance. Having no money to give herself, and not liking to apply to her husband, who was about to lose half his income, she felt bound to transmit the petition.

With a faltering voice, she related the position in which she had found this person, and asked Mrs. Gerald if she would do something for her. The name immediately attracted her attention.

"That was the name," she exclaimed, "of the hotel-keeper at Florence who gave evidence as to Annie's identity. I heard that they had both left Florence several years ago. Is he still alive?"

"No, he died some time ago."

"Is she in great distress?"

"Not in the lowest poverty, I think, but very ill off for a person who has known better days."

"I wonder if she knows anything of Caterina, Annie's nurse, who went back to Italy when she was five years old?"

"She is dead."

"Did Madame Ranolfi tell you so?"

"Yes, she did."

"Had she seen anything of her, do you know, since her return?"

"She said she had paid her a visit when she was ill."

"Is this Madame Ranolfi too ill to travel? I should like to see her."

"Oh, you had better not," Ita involuntarily exclaimed.

Mrs. Gerald's face betrayed most violent emotion. But she said, in a calm, dry manner, "And pray why not?"

"It would tire you," Ita said, "and agitate you too much. She would speak of those you have loved and lost."

"Of my brother and his wife?"

"Yes."

After a pause, Ita added, "And, besides, she is too ill, I think, to take a journey."

"Where does she live?"

Ita gave the address.

"I will send her some money," Mrs. Gerald said; and then changed the subject.

On the following Saturday, with a strong effort over himself, Edgar asked his wife if she wished to have a fly to take her to the Roman Catholic chapel at Grantley Manor. She said she would rather drive in her little pony-chaise in which she was accustomed to go long distances alone. It was not the solitary drive she dreaded, but the feeling that it would be the first time she and Edgar would not go to church together, and the last time he would do duty in Holmwood Church. He had arranged that the curate who had been there while he was abroad, should return and take charge of the parish till his successor was appointed. This would be perhaps the most painful moment of his life, and she would not be there to comfort and cheer him by that ardent sympathy which she had accustomed him to receive from her at every instant, and on

every occasion. On the contrary, he would be feeling all the time that but for her he should never have had that trial to go through. Oh, that persons who are inclined to be hard in their judgment and feelings about converts could know what the pain is of inflicting suffering on those we love —that they could estimate the strength of the convictions which force devoted and tender hearts to grieve the friends they love with ardent affection!

Sometimes people say that those who become Catholics look sad. Sometimes, on the other hand, they are reproached with looking happy when they have caused others sorrow. The truth is, that there is a deep fount of joy in the soul that has found its true home which no amount of suffering can dry up or stop from flowing, but it does not preclude suffering. Persons have smiled at the heavenly consolations poured into their souls amidst the torments of martyrdom, and many a convert looks happy whilst writhing under the severance of ties dearer than life, though not dearer than God. To be banished from home is a sad fate; to be scorned,

despised, and unkindly treated, is hard to bear; but the kind looks, the tender sorrow of a mother or husband, the sense of causing grief where it had been the dream of a whole life to give happiness, is a still sharper and more refined trial. Ita felt it in the very depth of her heart's core that Sunday morning when she rode away from the Vicarage after having kissed her husband, but without the courage to utter a single word. He had tried to smile but the effort had failed. She wondered if he would say words of farewell to his flock. She fancied what Annie would feel during the service, the grief of the parishioners, their indignation against herself; they must think her so much to blame. It was almost difficult at that moment not to blame herself; not for having been true to her faith, but for having ever married Edgar. But, as she drove on, gradually her mind became more calm. She gazed on the less familiar and most beautiful scenery beyond Holmwood Park with a more peaceful composure. On that tranquil Sunday morning when nature as well as man seemed resting in profound repose, scarcely a breath of air

waving the surface of the corn-fields or the foliage of the oaks and beeches, she commended to her Heavenly Father's care all that unknown future which seems so long a vista to those who are beginning life. She reposed on the consciousness of that wonderful love which encircles each human soul and cares for it individually with the minute solicitude of a boundless affection. She felt almost tangibly the support of that belief. It gave her courage to bear even the thought of Edgar's grief. If she loved him so much, what must be the love of the Creator for His creature? When she came in sight of Grantley Manor, it recalled to her the history of a short life which had ended there in the holy peaceful beauty of a slow decline. She remembered hearing that when, on her death-bed, Ginevra Neville received from her husband the assurance that he was resolved to embrace her faith, she had said, "Lord, now lettest Thou thy servant depart in peace," and died with those words on her lips — an enviable end, Ita thought. Mrs. Sydney was standing at the door ready to greet her. Ita had written to

her from London and again from Holmwood.

There was no need of words to express what Margaret Sydney felt, as she kissed the flushed cheek of Edgar Derwent's wife, and felt her heart beating against her own—she knew how keen was its suffering, and how intense its joy. She took her into the little church, which stood on one side of the flower-garden, where she and Ginevra had so often sat together. What Ita felt during Mass that day, what thanksgivings rose from the depths of her heart, what sweet tears filled her eyes, what a sense stole over her of repose in a true mother's arms, it is useless to dwell upon in such a story as this. Some who read it will know more on this point than we can tell them; others will wonder; some may pity and some may sneer. If it should fall into the hands of one hesitating whether to come over from the shadowy region of an imaginary church into the living one beyond, perhaps for him or for her, these few words from one who has crossed the border may not have been written in vain.

Ita was to spend the day at Grantley

Manor. She and Edgar had tacitly agreed that this would be better for both of them. She meant to go home after Benediction. To her surprise and pleasure, she found that Mr. Neville was staying with his sister. When the service was over, they all went into the shrubbery, and she then told them that her husband had resigned his living.

Mr. Neville made an exclamation of pleasure, but Mr. and Mrs. Sydney, who knew more than he did of Edgar's reasons, and of the circumstances of the case, guessed how trying to both husband and wife this resolution must be.

"It will be better in the long run, dearest Ita," Margaret said. "I can hardly imagine how he could have remained."

"I was mercifully blinded on that point," she answered. "The effort might have been too great for my strength, if I had been conscious that he would give up his home, without the consolations which I have in leaving it, and through my fault, as it were."

"*Felix Culpa*, as the Church says on Holy Saturday," Mr. Neville observed, with a smile.

Ita thought him a little unfeeling, but he was not so in reality. Only it sometimes happens that those who have much experience in dealing with aching hearts, know that excessive sympathy is not always the best remedy. He would not let Ita speak in a desponding manner about her husband, and asked where they were going to turn their steps. "The doctors," she said, "want us to go to Malvern. General increase of strength will improve his sight, they say. He has not yet decided on anything, but I hope we shall go there, and then . . . . I have not ventured to propose it yet, but oh, I should like to go back to Mentone for the winter."

"I am afraid he did not like it?"

"At first he did—not afterwards. He got the home, or rather the *Holmwood*, sickness, I think."

There was again a little suppressed sigh. Mrs. Sydney pressed her hand. "I can fancy what the trial is to you on his account."

"Well, and a little on my own too. I do love Holmwood very much, and especially

our own little house. We did spend such happy years there! But of course I ought only to be too glad to have something to sacrifice in return for all I have received; but when I see him turning away from the view, from the flowers, from everything about the place as if he could not bear the pain of looking on them, it is almost more than I can endure."

"All that pain is so much treasure," Mr. Neville said. "Do you not know that suffering obtains more even than prayer. It is like money put into your hands wherewith to purchase what you want God to give you."

"That is a new view of suffering," Ita said, smiling.

"No, indeed, a very old one. It dates from the time of our Lord's Passion."

"Edmund will never let any one lament over their sorrows," Margaret said, "but I tell him he is not logical, for nobody tries so hard to help them out of them."

"That's right, Margaret," Mr. Walter Sydney exclaimed, "I am glad you attack Edmund on that point. He is very inconsistent. I am sure now, that if he could make Mrs. Derwent mistress of Holmwood

House to-morrow—without driving poor Miss Annie out, of course—he would set about it directly."

Mr. Neville's eyes met Ita's. It was but for a minute, and she could not have said for sure if there was any meaning in that look. She could not fancy how he could possibly have a suspicion on the subject—unless . . . . it would have been a most strange coincidence, but such things do sometimes happen—he should be the priest whom Madame Ranolfi had seen in London. She could not resist, after speaking of the Rolands, about whom the Sydneys were much interested, casually remarking that she had been with Eliza to see a poor Italian person living near Manchester Square, but she could not perceive that this seemed at all to interest him, and the conversation took another direction.

"It is almost luncheon time," Margaret said, a little while afterwards, and led the way to the house. As they were crossing the flower-garden, the sound of a horse galloping very fast surprised them.

"Who can that be?" Mrs. Sydney ex-

claimed. Her thoughts turned to Walter's old father, who was at that moment at Heron Castle.

A man on horseback arriving at that rate gave her a misgiving that bad news were at hand. She hurried on before the rest, and met the servant crossing the hall with a letter in his hand.

"It is for Mrs. Derwent," he said, "a messenger has brought it post haste."

The note was from Edgar. It ran thus:

"DEAR ITA,—You had better come back as soon as you can. My poor aunt has been taken suddenly ill—a sort of seizure.—Your affectionate husband, "E. DERWENT."

Ita read these words, and turned as pale as death. "Will you have my pony-chaise got ready immediately," she said to Margaret; "Mrs. Gerald is dangerously ill."

"Order the carriage this moment," Mrs. Sydney said to the servant. "I will drive you back," she continued, turning to Ita; "you must not go back alone in this state of anxiety."

Ita nodded assent, and went to the win-

dow unable to speak. The Sydneys were surprised at her agitation, and the alteration of her countenance. They had no idea, as they said afterwards to each other, that she was so much attached to Mrs. Gerald. The fact was, that Ita was bewildered with the sudden emotions which these tidings had awakened. She was very fond of Mrs. Gerald. She had always been so, whether it was *la voix du sang*, as the French say, or simply a liking for that cold-mannered, but warm-hearted woman; there was no doubt that she had, from the first, cared much more for her than for Lady Emily Hendon, Annie, or any one else, except Edgar. But, besides the affection which would have in any case made her feel the shock of this announcement, there was much besides that made it agitating. First, the idea that Mrs. Gerald might die without knowing what she herself felt now perfectly sure of, that is, that she was her brother's child—the real Annie—the niece whom she would have loved perhaps, not more than the other Annie, but in a different way; because, instead of meeting with coldness, and an ungenial want of warmly, that

love would have been warmly reciprocated. And then with a not perhaps unnatural inconsistency, though she could not foresee how her identity could be ever established without cruelty to Annie, and that she could not bear to think of, she could not help feeling a sort of despair at the idea that Mrs. Gerald would die without expressing a doubt on the subject of hers and Annie's birth, such as she was convinced she felt.

"Will you put me down at the west lodge-gate," she said to Margaret, as they approached Holmwood. "In five minutes I can run through the grove to the house." She thought Edgar and Annie would, perhaps, be looking out for her, and that they would dislike even the sight of Mrs. Sydney that day. Margaret understood her, and complied with the request.

Edgar was walking up and down the terrace, and came to meet her. "How is she?" Ita gasped out.

"Very ill indeed—quite speechless, but sensible—looks anxious. She has been watching the door; I think it must be you she wants to see."

"I had better go to her at once." As they were passing through the hall, and up the stairs, Ita asked, "How does Annie bear it?"

"She looks ill and scared, but says nothing. She has not left her bedside a minute."

Ita entered gently the darkened room, and knelt down by the side of the bed opposite to where Annie was sitting. The haggard, wan, death-like face of poor Mrs. Gerald was turned towards the door when she came in—a keen look, not of joy, or of pain, but of eagerness appeared in it when she approached. She could not move a limb, nor utter a word, but in her eyes there was still a power of expression, and they fixed themselves wistfully, sometimes, Ita fancied, reproachfully upon her. She could hardly endure that prolonged, imploring, silent gaze. She bent down over the cold, powerless hand, to hide, as it were, from that piercing look; but, whenever she raised her head, there it was still directed upon her.

Mrs. Gerald never recovered her speech; for a day and a night she lay on her death-

bed motionless and silent, and the two beings she had so strangely and differently loved, scarcely ever left her side. Edgar now and then came in and read some prayers. He could not ascertain if she joined in them or not. No one could tell what passed between her soul and God during those lonely hours. Once Ita was left, for a short time, alone with her. The eyes of the dying woman had been closed for awhile as if dozing, when she opened them they had a wild expression, something of a struggle, a desperate effort to speak took place, and then a look of hopeless despondency. Ita knelt close to the pillow, put her head quite near to Mrs. Gerald's, and then said, in a low, distinct voice, "My own, own dear aunt, I love you so much. You have been very good to me. It was not your fault. You could not help it. We shall always love Annie, and remember you with gratitude."

She never knew for sure if these words were heard or understood. She thought a change, a softening expression came into Mrs. Gerald's face. One tear rolled silently down the wan cheek; she went to the other side of

the bed, and taking in hers the hand that still retained warmth and life, she kissed it tenderly, and said, "Dearest, you wish to believe all that God has revealed?" her hand was gently pressed. "You hope He will save you because He is goodness itself?" again the feeble pressure was felt. "You love Him because He has loved you, and because of his goodness you repent of all your sins?" More earnestly still the assenting token was given, and Ita blessed God that He had inspired her to make that simple appeal, and for giving her a hope beyond the grave for that heart which had known so little peace on earth. When the end drew near, and every one in the house gathered round the bed, Ita knelt by Annie's side. Annie had not shed a tear; she seemed turned to stone. Suddenly she rose, and went and stood where Ita generally did, and bending down, looked into her aunt's face. Mrs. Gerald made an effort to lift up the hand she still could move, and Annie placed her head under it. It rested there a moment. Edgar did the same; then the dying eyes seemed to wander in search of some one else, and when

Ita approached, the hand was not placed on her head, but took hold of her, and it would not let her go; as long as there was life in it, it kept its hold, and when the last moment came Mrs. Gerald died in Ita's arms.

Like a marble image, Annie sat by the side of the lifeless form, not weeping or moaning, apparently insensible. In vain Edgar spoke to her; she took no notice of him. At last he said to his wife, who was crying bitterly—"Try what you can do; see if you cannot lead her away."

Ita approached, and put her arm round Annie, who gave a violent start.

"Leave me—leave me!" she exclaimed. "You have taken everything from me. The love of all who ever cared for me. All these dreadful hours she was looking at you, not at me. She died with her hand in yours—loving you more than me."

As she said those last words, there was something most painful in the expression of Annie's countenance—jealousy, resentment, almost hatred, breathed in it. This in the chamber of death was terrible; poor girl! She felt it herself. Crossing her arms on her

breast, and standing still for a moment, she exclaimed: "My heart is turned to stone. I feel as if God had forsaken me. Oh, it is horrible to be angry with one who is dead!" Then she fell on her knees and kissed the feet of her whom in her own hard strange way she had loved, and afterwards left the room with a rigid composure, almost more painful than her violence.

CHAPTER XIV.

The day after Mrs. Gerald's decease, as Ita was thinking over that rapid illness and her death, which she could hardly yet realize, it struck her that the night before she had seen, lying on her table, the letter directed to Mrs. Dallas, which she had noticed the morning after her arrival, and another, in a bad foreign hand, which she could not help fancying was from Madame Ranolfi. She thought how terrible it would be if Annie came across anything which would suddenly awaken doubts as to her birth. At a time when her heart was frozen, as it were, with grief, and dreadfully sore, it might have a terrible effect upon her. Edgar came into the room at that moment, and they both sat down silently to breakfast.

"I have been to Annie's room," he said.

"She is not asleep, but she sits still, refusing to speak or move. She will not eat anything. I am quite anxious about her. Grief, in natures like hers, makes a terrible impression. I do not know what we can do. If we cannot influence her, who would? I hope, however, that these morbid feelings will not last. It did seem to me that my poor aunt showed a preference for you during her illness. There is no accounting for that sort of thing. Sometimes the person most loved seems the least noticed or remembered at such a time."

Ita made no reply; but, after a pause, she said, "Have you or Annie the right to take charge of Mrs. Gerald's letters and papers?"

Edgar seemed surprised at the question. "Why do you ask?" he said.

"Because, dearest, I think . . . . I have some idea that Annie might come suddenly upon some letters that would distress her. I am not quite sure, but I think so."

"Really!" Edgar exclaimed. "You do not mean that my aunt was a Roman Catholic!"

"Oh no. What I mean has nothing to do with religion."

"With what has it to do with, then?"

Ita turned her head away. Her cheeks were crimson. She felt the time was come to speak; but it was an immense effort. "I have been in great doubt," she said, "whether I ought to say anything to you about it."

"Is it part of the teaching of your new religion to have secrets which you do not tell your husband?"

This was the first unkind thing Edgar had said to his wife since her return to Holmwood. Many bitter, painful thoughts had been in his mind, but they had not passed his lips. He had strictly schooled his acts and his words, but not his inward emotions; and sorrow, irritation, and perplexity at that moment overcame his self-control. Annie's dogged, bitter grief, his own sorrow at his aunt's death, and Ita's hesitating words and manner, all combined to harass him. Everything that had hitherto made the happiness of his life, seemed to fail him. He walked up and down the room, looking gloomy and careworn. Poor Ita was still more wretched.

This seemed, again, a bad moment to enter upon a subject on which she had no idea how he would feel. Unless she could explain the cause of her reluctance to broach it, and by what slow degrees and at what inopportune moments the thought had arisen and grown in her mind, until gradual evidence confirmed it, he would think she had been wanting in openness with him. She could not, however, let that taunt pass unanswered.

"On the contrary," she said, laying her hand gently on his arm, "on the contrary, it is my religion that gives me courage to speak now of what I had not courage to speak of before."

"What on earth are you talking of?" he exclaimed, standing before her with a look of displeasure.

She trembled like a leaf, but felt desperate.

"Edgar, I am not at all sure that I am not your cousin, Mrs. Gerald's niece—the person Annie has been always supposed to be."

She remained with her eyes fixed on the floor, anxiously expecting his next words.

His amazement was indescribable. At first he felt afraid that she had lost her senses; but thought travels rapidly over what takes a long time to relate. Two or three circumstances came into his mind, to which he had never attached any importance, but that at once filled him with agitation. Some hints Mrs. Gerald had thrown out, which he did not in the least understand; the marked way in which, almost the last time he had seen her before her illness, she had made him look at Mrs. Derwent's picture; and when he had said, "I have always thought it very like Ita," the way she had stared at him, with a half wistful, half bewildered gaze.

"Come into the garden," he said, quite wildly.

They hurried out of doors, across the terrace, down to the lawn, and into the grove. He held Ita's arm close to his heart. At that moment all estrangement seemed to have disappeared.

"Let us sit down," she said, panting for breath, for he had walked quicker than he knew.

"Tell me everything," he said, "from

the earliest moment that thought first came into your mind."

"Well, many things puzzled me long before any suspicion on this point even crossed my mind. I always thought poor Mrs. Gerald's manner to me very odd, from my very first acquaintance with her. She used to watch me so much. She was sometimes so kind; but oftener, as if she was keeping me at a distance, and trying not to be fond of me. I was always very fond of her. I do not, of course, mean that that is any proof of what we are speaking of. The first thing that puzzled me was her violent agitation when Annie dressed me up like Mrs. Derwent's picture. I told you, you know, about that at Mentone."

"She never could bear the pictures in her room to be looked at."

"So you said; but she did not only look angry, but so pale and agitated. Then, after Lady Emily's death, her asking me to come and live with her, surprised me very much. But I never had the least idea of what I mentioned just now, till I heard from the priest, at Colla, that a Mrs. Dallas had

written to make inquiries of him about the child that Giovanni Piombo had picked up at sea—I mean, about the time and the place where he had found her."

"Did you ever tell her you were brought up at Colla?"

"At Spedaletti, you mean. Yes, I remember her asking me the name of the place I lived at before Lady Emily adopted me. I think I mentioned to you that a poor woman from Mentone——"

"That Mariana . . . ."

"Yes; that she had been to see the same priest, and told him she had lost her child in an accident that had happened near Genoa. He did not recollect the date. I found her out, you know, at Mentone, and she told me all about that accident, and that she remembered giving her child into the arms of a sailor just as the crash took place, but nothing since for a long time afterwards. She was some years in the hospital at Genoa, but could not tell how long. I could not, therefore, ascertain anything about dates—whether they coincided."

"The only time I ever heard my poor

aunt speak of the accident in which my uncle and his wife perished, she said Annie had been saved by a sailor, and that they were the only two living persons she believed that had escaped; but that may have been a mistake. There is something strange in what you tell me, but nothing like proof."

"I have not finished yet. One day that Mariana was talking of her past history, she mentioned to me that there was an English lady, with her husband, on board that steamer, who had been very kind to her, and had given her child some of her own baby's clothes."

"Did she say so?"

"Yes, I asked her if she could tell me how the clothes were marked, but she could not; and then, Edgar . . . . this is the principal thing . . . . I told you of it at Mentone . . . . but, somehow, you were ill, and did not pay any attention to it . . . . but I found in a box in the lumber-room at the villa the clothes I had on when Giovanni Piombo took me into his boat. He sent them with me when I went to live at Lady Emily's, and they are marked A. D. I can show them to you when you like . . . ."

"What! and that woman told you that an English lady had given some of her child's clothes to her baby?"

"Yes."

"But why on earth did not you tell me all this before my aunt's death?"

"I tried sometimes . . . ."

"Tried! nonsense!"

"Then I did not feel at all *sure* till the other day in London."

"What, what happened there?"

"I came across an Italian woman who was at that home you took me to. When she heard my name was Derwent she wished to speak to me. Do you remember the Superioress asking me to talk to one of the patients; she was the mistress of the hotel at Florence, where . . . ." Ita stopped short and burst into tears. "I do not know how to call them, I feel so sure now they were my parents . . . ."

"You must not allow yourself to dwell too much on that thought, Ita," her husband said, greatly agitated himself. "Well, and what did she say about them?"

"That she was so good, so charitable,

and only think . . . . that she saw her take out of her trunks, to her maid's great displeasure, some of her baby's clothes, and give them to a poor Italian woman on board the vessel in which she was so soon to perish."

"Is this woman do you say in London?"

"Yes, she is very poor and very ill. She told me also that her husband had been sent for to Genoa to give evidence as to the identity of the child that had been saved from the wreck, and that he had declared it was their child. But she found he had done so without much caring what he said, and chiefly because of the initials on the clothes, and Mrs. Gerald's being so anxious about it. And Caterina . . . ."

"Annie's Italian nurse?"

"Yes, she told Madame Ranolfi on her death-bed that she saw it was not the same child, but she would not contradict her master, and she wanted to be engaged as nurse to the baby."

"And why did she tell you all this and not to my aunt?"

"She seemed in great doubt as to what

was her duty. She did not know if Annie was not Annie, who was being wronged. You see she had no idea that the real child could be living. She said the priest whose advice she had asked said she ought to find out to whom the property would have gone supposing *their* child had died. She asked me that question, and I said to you."

"Or rather to you if the truth can be ascertained," Edgar interrupted.

"Oh no, if anything is discovered, if Annie is Mariana's child, it had better be as if I had died, and nothing said about me. It would break her heart to give up Holmwood to me but not to you. But I was forgetting to tell you something more, which possibly might be of importance. Poor Mariana, when we were speaking about my having been found at sea (I never said anything to her about Annie, I thought it more prudent not), asked to look at my shoulder. She said her child had a mark from an accident which the doctors said would always remain. There was no trace of it on my shoulder. Of course it might have disappeared . . . . but supposing Annie had it . . . ."

"My aunt should have known all this," Edgar exclaimed.

"You see, Edgar, I dared not come here that day when you were all so displeased with me, and you so sorry for Annie, and say that, perhaps, I ought to be where she is."

"I am not at all sure what ought to be done," Edgar exclaimed. "We owe so much to poor Annie."

He fixed his eyes on his wife, and all sorts of thoughts passed through his mind. He was struck with her paleness; her sweet anxious face; the wistful gentleness with which she seemed to await his decision, ready to forego every worldly advantage at his desire, content to abide by his decision.

"I am not at all sure that it could be proved," he said, "any part of it; and even if it were possible that we could ever try legally to dispossess Annie."

"Oh no, never, never," Ita exclaimed.

"And yet," he replied, "if we had children it might be our duty. Annie might be completely estranged from us, she marry, and the inheritance of my family, which for centuries has been ours, would go

to aliens. And if we do not speak now, we can never raise again the question."

Ita had felt a little his saying *my* family, not *ours*. She would gladly never have been recognized by any one else, but she would have liked him to have given a tacit proof that he thought she was his uncle's child. But these refined distinctions were not in his nature. He was not, as we have often said, selfish or egotistical, two very different through kindred defects; but he was engrossed by his own thoughts and feelings—generous, good, honest ones—but riding somewhat roughly through the sensitive fibres of a more delicate organization.

"Whatever were your reasons — your feelings rather," he said, "and I certainly can understand them, it is much to be regretted that you did not disclose all this before Mrs. Gerald's death."

"I cannot help thinking, and this makes me very unhappy, that she may have heard some part of it in a sudden manner. I saw lying on her table, the day she was taken ill, a letter written in a foreign hand, with a London postmark; and I am almost sure the

handwriting was Madame Ranolfi's. I had one from her myself a short time ago, and had seen one before that directed to Mrs. Dallas. That is what I meant just now about your taking possession of the letters . . . . Annie might find and read something which might puzzle and frighten her about all this."

"True; you are right. She is resting now—asleep her maid hoped. We could go gently into my poor aunt's sitting-room. I think, as her nephew, I have quite as good a right as Annie to the possession of her papers, which I will lock up, and not look at, till by her will we find out to whom they properly belong. God is my witness, I do not take this step to secure these letters in my own interest."

Ita smiled; the idea had not even occurred to her.

"Come," he said, "let us see at once about it." They walked towards the house; as they passed the church, he sighed, and said, "Ita, if you are my cousin, you have forsaken the Church of your baptism."

She laid her head on his arm; even that

reproach was better than his mournful silence. "Dearest," she murmured, "does not the uncertainty of my fate in that respect demonstrate the fallacy of that theory?"

"Ita, I cannot bear this barrier between our hearts."

"Nor I," she exclaimed, burying her face in his breast. "But you must come on to me. I can never go back. Edgar, I could as soon kill myself."

"Do you feel that *really—truly?*"

"God knows I do," she murmured.

"Well, may He enlighten whichever of us is mistaken!" Edgar exclaimed, with a good deal of emotion, as they entered the house.

They went quietly upstairs, passed Annie's bed-room, and heard from her maid that she was still sleeping. Passing through Mrs. Gerald's bed-room, they knelt together by the side of the cold inanimate form. Both of them, as they prayed there, thought of the long, anxious, unquiet years during which she had endured an inward strife they could now begin to understand; and none but God would ever know what had passed in that restless mind during the hours when the

power of speech had fled, when intercourse with those who stood around her was denied. Silent she had lived, and silently she had died. Was her memory impaired during that time? Did mental oppression obliterate the bitter traces of over-anxious doubts? or did they work their way into the soul with despairing clearness, while the lips were closed and the hand motionless. Ita had seen a tear roll down that worn cheek. She had seen a look she never could forget fixed upon her, turned upon her with an unspeakable earnestness. She had given in answer to that look a pledge, and it was in accordance with that pledge she had opened her heart to her husband.

"Let us promise here," she whispered to him, "to be a true brother and sister to Annie."

He squeezed her hand; they rose together, and went into the other room.

The drawers of the bureau were unlocked, and several letters and papers lying on the table—amongst them the one Ita had noticed the previous day. Edgar swept them all together into a half-open drawer, locked it, and

was taking out the key, when the door of the room opened, and Annie came into the room. Both Edgar and Ita were startled at her sudden appearance. They felt as if they were doing something wrong, though their only object was kindness to her. She noticed their embarrassment. She saw the key in Edgar's hand. A livid, deadly paleness overspread her face. It had a sort of wild beauty they had never seen in it before. Her eyes were lighted up with a strange fire. She stood staring at them as if some powerful emotion was vainly striving to find vent in utterance at least.

"So you have come," she said, "to take possession of her letters, of all that belonged to her, but you shall not have them. You shall have nothing that was hers. I gave *him* up to you," she said, turning to Ita, and pointing to Edgar. "But I never gave up *her* love. I never gave it up, though I did not seem to value it. She never knew how much I loved her. You came and stood by her death-bed, and had her last look of affection. Go away—go away, Ita, and you too, Edgar; I do not care

for either of you. I am alone now. I will live here alone, and die alone; but everything in this room is mine. Nobody shall take a scrap of paper or an old pen from that table —give me that key."

Edgar felt distracted. If in that frame of mind she read the letters he had locked up, it might almost affect her mind. And yet, as it was only a supposition, he could scarcely act upon it. He looked at Ita in despair, then he said, "My own dear Annie, it is right that dearest Mrs. Gerald's papers should be locked up till her will is read. Then we shall know who has a right to take care of them."

"No one has any right to them but me. Give me that key."

The thought crossed Edgar's mind whether it was possible that Annie did know anything of these particular letters. If so, he would not have hesitated to give up at once to her the possession of the bureau. What he dreaded was a sudden discovery; and yet how to prepare her mind at such a moment for a possible disclosure, and one which it would be cruel, perhaps, in any case

to make, but certainly so if it was presented to her mind only in the shape of a painful doubt.

At last, as she was becoming every moment paler, and a deep red spot crimsoning on her cheek, he placed the key in her hand and said, "Here it is, dearest Annie. I know you will feel yourself bound in honour not to examine the contents of those drawers till the will has been read."

She sat down with the key in her hand, and large tears rolled down her cheek.

"Go away, dearest," Edgar whispered to his wife. "Perhaps if I am alone with her, I can soothe her."

Ita, as she passed by Annie, did not venture to kiss her, but pressed her lips on her sleeve. Her arm was hanging helplessly by the side of the chair in which she had sunk.

"Annie," Edgar began, but his voice faltered; she looked such a picture of misery.

"Annie, do try and pray."

"No," she said abruptly. "My head is confused. I cannot pray."

"Shall I pray with you?"

"No, no. I do not know what is right or what is wrong. *She* thought one way, you another, Ita another."

"But there is one thought in which we all agree. God is our Father, and Jesus our Saviour. You can raise up your heart to God—you can call on our Lord."

"No; if God was my Father, He would show me what is right. I have never had much comfort in religion. I have not a pious nature. I am not like Ita, or Eliza, or Mrs. Sydney. I wanted to be taught what was true, as Mr. Pratt used to teach me, and to have no doubts. Poor old man—poor old man!"

How often, when the heart is aching with some great recent blow, it turns to some simple, old, long-buried affection, and calls on one in the grave with a strange self-pitying yearning.

Edgar did not know what to say or do. He longed to comfort, but felt powerless in the presence of that simple, unimaginative, despairing grief.

Annie said, after a pause, "You had better leave me. You have your wife. She

takes you away from Holmwood, but with her you will be happy everywhere."

"But, dearest Annie, what will you do? who will be with you?"

"Nobody; that is what I want. I could not make you, and I could not make *her*, happy. I can never make anybody happy. I mean to live alone."

All that was wild and almost fierce in her countenance had passed away. Only an intense dejection, a look of hopeless despondency remained. "Good-bye, Edgar," she gently said. "I am glad we are once more alone. I am glad your wife went away, for I can no longer love her. I loved her for your sake. I loved her as long as she made you happy. But now she has robbed *you* of your happiness, and she robbed me of *her* love, and I hate her."

"Oh, Annie, Annie, do not say that. If you knew . . . ."

"What! are you not broken-hearted because she has turned Catholic? And did not *she* gaze on her and not on me in her last moments?"

"Ita could not help it."

"Oh yes, you find excuses for her; you love her, and I am glad you do. There is nothing so dreadful as not to love—to have nothing to love . . . . I am glad you love her."

"We both love you, Annie, and you loved us."

"I tried," she said.

There was something so sad, so melancholy, so full of meaning in those two words, that Edgar felt his heart sink within him. He kissed Annie's hand and went away.

The Vicarage and its pretty smiling garden were lighted up by the evening sun, the dew drops glittering on each blade of grass and trembling leaf. Holmwood spreading out its lawns and forest in their full summer beauty. The birds flying about among the old trees of the churchyard. Edgar looked on the whole scene with a new extraordinary feeling. There was little doubt now, in his mind, as well as in Ita's, that she was the child who should have inherited those broad lands, that fair domain. But it seemed hopeless that this should be ever recognized short of taking steps he could hardly conceive would be successful, even if

he had made up his mind they would be right or desirable. And they were going to leave behind all this beauty, all this peace—even the duty of watching over that lonely, friendless girl, the innocent occupant, perhaps, of a position she had no right, to leave her alone with her wealth, her sad, angry thoughts, her vague unbelief — and all because Ita would be a Catholic. He tried to rouse himself again to indignation, but the awful realities of death, the scenes they had gone through together, the nearness with which their hearts had throbbed side by side, the difficulties of the present, the mysterious future, had imparted a different spirit to his dream. He could not re-awaken his indignation, not in the same measure, at least. Though the sight of many things about his house made him sad, and recalled to his mind that, after the funeral, they would soon depart to return no more to that blissful home, he did not grieve for himself half as much as for Annie. Ita was there, and that was the *sine qua non* of his earthly happiness. And she did feel and act so nobly. She was so thoroughly good. He could not hate her

religion quite so intensely as he had done —that strange religion so strangely adapted to every need and every craving of the human soul. Perhaps he had arrived at the point where Dr. Newman was when he exclaimed, "Would that thy creed were sound, O Church of Rome, for thou dost soothe the heart."

Perhaps as he began to notice the difference of expression in the face which had long been anxious, sad, and wistful, though always gentle, and saw that even in the midst of sorrow there was in it an unmistakable expression of peaceful serenity, he mentally resigned himself to the lot she had chosen for herself and for him. Perhaps he felt that if God had shown her what He had not made clear to him, and since she had had the courage to go forward alone, that it might not be after all such a curse and a misery. If Annie had been less desolate he would not have been very unhappy that evening. What he had heard from his wife that day occupied him very much. He was at a loss how to act, but at last he determined after the funeral was over to go to London and see

Madame Ranolfi. From her at least he might gather sufficient evidence to satisfy his own mind on the question of Annie's, and possibly of Ita's, identity. Her undoubted resemblance to Mrs. Derwent's picture, considering the corroborating circumstances, appeared to him conclusive. He had the greatest desire to show that picture to persons unconcerned on the subject. But there seemed no possible means of effecting this. After the coffin had been removed from the bed-room to an apartment on the ground floor, he stole upstairs one afternoon to look at them himself, but he found the door locked; the housekeeper who had seen him trying to open it, said, "Miss Derwent has got that key, sir, and also the one of the dressing-room. She goes in there herself, but nobody else does."

This might be a natural fear of interruption and a desire to nurse her grief in secret, but it was possible, just possible, that she was looking over the letters in the bureau —possible that she had found in them something bearing on her own fate—possible that she looked anxiously at that picture which four years ago she had said was so like Ita.

She would remember also, he thought, the incident of the turban and Mrs. Gerald's agitation. Had she read the letters? Was she studying the picture in connection with them? What were Annie's thoughts?

She would not see Ita at all, and as little of him as she could help. She pointedly made all the arrangements for the funeral without his aid and assistance, consulting her agent and her steward. She took her meals alone, and never came to the Vicarage. She did not actually refuse to admit him when he asked to see her, but his efforts at consolation were vain. She was looking wretchedly ill, and he could not keep out of his mind whenever he saw her, the words, "The iron has entered into her soul."

But what had driven it in? did she suspect, did she know, did she dread anything? The doubt was tormenting, and he saw no means of solving it. He could not but consider it just possible that in Mrs. Gerald's will there might be some allusion to the subject. Perhaps some statement, perhaps some directions that the subject should be investigated. And yet it would be more likely

that she should have left a private letter to him than that she should have made public any doubt that might have lately occurred to her. Six days had now elapsed since her death; the funeral was to take place on the morrow. It had been necessary to invite Mr. and Mrs. Langdon to the Vicarage—a heavy aggravation to his trouble and annoyance. They had never been at Holmwood House, for Mrs. Gerald did not care to see them, and only once before at his cottage since he had married Ita. Their attending her funeral was therefore a mere form, and he felt it would aggravate Annie's sufferings by adding to them the embarrassment of seeing persons who were almost strangers to her at such a time. Then he had been obliged to write to his mother that Ita had become a Catholic, and it would be difficult to keep from her his own resolution to resign his living, and his prospects of preferment in the Church of England.

Her lamentations, and Mr. Langdon's comments on the subject, he dreaded with a keen sensitiveness; and not without reason, at any rate, as regarded Mrs. Langdon's

feelings. He was fond of his mother, and she doted upon him, but since his earliest childhood there had been little sympathy between them. His happiest days had always been spent at Holmwood. Mrs. Gerald and Annie had stood to him far more in the position of his own family than his mother and her husband. He seemed to pay visits to Lowndes Square, and to come home to Holmwood. His heart was full just then, his mind oppressed with various and anxious thoughts. Never had he been so little disposed for conversation. Though considerably better in health since his return to England, he was not yet strong, and there was still about him a degree of nervous irritability he could not shake off. Ita felt just as he did, but discomfort and anxiety are better endured by women than by men. The latter can face danger and pain, but uneasiness sits heavily upon them.

Now that a subject so full of importance, so deeply interesting, had been broached between them, Edgar and Ita could talk of little else; and he kept continually forgetting his displeasure against her. She was so

exactly, he thought, what she ought to be, under the circumstances—feeling intensely for Annie, but also for him. They looked on everything about them in a different way. They discussed a great deal the possibility of the truth coming out without their stirring in it—wondered what Annie would feel if such a thing were to happen. He made her describe, over and over again, Mariana's appearance, and then recal her own youthful recollections. The topic that he had most avoided and disliked became the most intensely interesting to him. If it had been possible for Edgar to think his wife more charming and attractive than he had always done, the romance which this singular disclosure threw over her birth and her fate would have increased the fascination. The hours he spent alone with her those days were his only comfort. They were both very unhappy about Annie. The servants reported that she ate scarcely at all, and sat the whole day in what had been Mrs. Gerald's apartments. She spoke to no one. "Her eyes look too large for her face;" "and she is growing so thin," the housekeeper said.

"Ita!" Edgar exclaimed, after they had heard this, "does she suspect? does she think or know anything? Is not this great dark grief otherwise unaccountable? Is there a struggle going on in her mind?"

"I cannot guess, but you know I have always thought Annie's a very jealous nature. And she was always jealous of Mrs. Gerald's affection, though she seemed cold to her."

"But could a jealous person have acted towards us as she did?"

"Yes; I think so. Her great love for you was stronger than even her jealousy of me. I cannot help thinking that she feels now that she was always cold to the one person who most cared for her, and that that heart which had been so devoted was estranged at last. That could account, I think, for her depression. But, oh! how sad it is to think of her *there—there*, in that room, alone—with no comfort, no faith, no object to live for . . . . And how terrible it will be if she refuses to see us—if she continues in this state!"

"We cannot go away and leave her here alone. What can we do?"

At that moment, the fly containing Mr. and Mrs. Langdon was heard rumbling on the road, and in a few minutes they arrived. She had a *visage de circonstance*, which varied in its character according as it was meant to refer to Mrs. Gerald's death or Ita's change of religion.

"I cannot trust myself to speak of my feelings," she said on entering the drawing-room, and she kept down her veil, afraid of not looking as sorrowful or as indignant as each occasion required.

Mr. Langdon was particularly kind in his manner to Ita, but talked in a way that made her more uncomfortable than ever. Every word he uttered was gall and wormwood to Edgar, and he kept asking her questions which she was obliged to answer, though she would have given anything to remain silent. In despair she led him into the garden, and left the mother and son together.

"My dear Edgar," she began, "this is a dreadful blow."

"My poor aunt's death?"

"Yes, of course, but it is still sadder

about your wife. I suppose it must have been in the blood."

"No," he answered, shortly, "not at all in the blood, I think."

"But it is otherwise so unaccountable."

"No, I do not think so. I am very sorry—nobody can be more so—that she has seen it in that light, but I have no doubt Ita has acted conscientiously."

"I am really tired of hearing of people's consciences. They seem to make them do no end of wrong and foolish things. How shall you manage here with a Roman Catholic wife?"

"I shall not manage at all, I have resigned the living."

"And you mean to live on £300 a year. Good heavens! what folly! and is it true that Miss Derwent is so angry with Margaret that she will never again do anything for you? Of course she will marry, if only out of spite, and she will be quite right. I should do it if I was her. And now there is Mr. Langdon catching cold out of doors. No, you had better not call him in, but just take him his comforter. How has Mrs. Gerald left her fortune?"

"We shall know it to-morrow when her will is opened."

"If she has not left it to you, I can never forgive your wife."

"No, of course, that circumstance would make her conversion at once a perversion," Mr. Langdon remarked, having heard his wife's emphatic declaration as he came into the room, comforter in hand.

Neither Ita nor Edgar could endure this sort of conversation. The subject was too sore and too sacred a one to bear such handling; but it was what Dr. Johnson wished the young lady's sonata to be, not difficult but impossible, to check that *vieillard terrible* from talking of whatever he liked.

In the middle of the evening he growled out, after staring a moment at Ita, "What colour do you call your eyes, Mrs. Derwent?"

"Brown, I suppose," she answered, looking up from her work, the light of the lamp shining full on her face.

"I never saw any at all like them," he persisted, "except those of Mrs. Robert Derwent, Miss Derwent's mother. I had once

to contribute something to her album when she was Miss Maud Ardon, and I wrote a poem beginning, 'Her eyes are like no other eyes.'"

Ita coloured and bent hers down on her cross-stitch. "Will it all be ever known?" she thought.

Mr. Langdon went on talking of the time when he had met Miss Ardon at a country house in Yorkshire. Then he asked how Annie was.

Edgar answered, "Not well, and in great affliction."

"No wonder," Mrs. Langdon ejaculated; "every kind of sorrow has come upon her at once."

"Mrs. Derwent had better convert Miss Annie," her husband observed. "Then she might be a nun. That would suit all parties. Would it not, Mrs. Langdon? It would save you the trouble of wondering so often if Miss Derwent will ever marry."

The evening was not a pleasant one. It was a relief, at least to some of the party, when it was time at a reasonable hour to go to bed.

CHAPTER XV.

The funeral was over. It had been quite private; only a few old friends and neighbours were present. Amongst them were Lord and Lady Carsdale, Mr. Hendon, and, rather to Edgar's surprise, Mr. and Mrs. Walter Sydney. Annie had ordered that they should be invited. Mrs. Sydney had called several times on Mrs. Gerald during her illness, and those visits seemed to please the invalid. He supposed, when he heard this, that it was on that account she had wished them to be asked.

After everybody else had driven away, Edgar shook hands with the Sydneys; and while he was speaking to Walter Sydney, Ita had time to say a few words to Margaret. She told her that, as far as regarded her

husband, she was much happier than on the first days after her return. That a common sorrow and a common anxiety had broken down the reserve between them.

"Your sorrow I can well understand," Margaret answered; "but is there any new cause for anxiety?"

"About Annie," Ita replied, and then described the state she had been in since Mrs. Gerald's death. "It is so distressing," she added, "we do not know what to do. Edgar will not remain here, and she does not say a word about our staying with her. Yet we cannot bear to go away, and leave her so utterly desolate."

"Perhaps she hardly thinks of anything yet. A first sorrow has sometimes a bewildering effect on the mind. But could you not persuade your husband to come and stay some time with us before you make any further plans? You would still be near Miss Derwent."

"I should like it so much, so very much," Ita answered; "but I doubt his accepting your kind invitation. But I will speak to him about it, and let you know."

"When is Mrs. Gerald's will to be opened?"

"This afternoon, I believe."

"Dearest Ita," Margaret said, in a hesitating manner, "I suppose you expect . . . . I mean, you have reason to expect that she has left her fortune to your husband . . . ."

"I should have almost made sure of it some time ago, but everything has been so changed lately . . . . I do not know how far she was annoyed at my conversion. Not very much, I think. Indeed, I fancied she had some faint desire to know more of our religion; but perhaps at first she was angry, and it occurred to me that the wistful look—a painfully wistful look—she kept turning on me after she had lost her speech, and was paralyzed, might be caused by something she had done, and perhaps wished undone. I hope not; I hope it is all right. I am not heroic. I *cannot* wish to have deprived him of *everything*."

Ita burst into tears. Mrs. Sydney looked at her anxiously.

"Will you promise me one thing?"

"What?"

"If it should prove a strange, perplexing, painful will, do not be too unhappy about it."

"I will try not. You must pray for me."

They kissed, and Mrs. Sydney went away. There was a heavy cloud on her bright and still lovely face.

In the afternoon, the family assembled in the library, for the opening and reading of Mrs. Gerald's will. Annie and Ita sat side by side on the same couch, both in deep mourning: Annie's face perfectly colourless, and her eyes fixed on vacancy with a stern calmness; her hands were folded together, and resting listlessly on her knees. Ita, on the contrary, was flushed, and there was an appearance of nervous excitement in her countenance and her frequent changes of attitude: her colour went and came, and she glanced sometimes at her husband, who, almost as motionless as Annie, stood leaning with his back to the fireplace; sometimes at Mrs. Langdon, who was in a very restless state of mind; and sometimes at the lawyer, who was about to read the will, and who knew its contents, which gave him a momen-

tary interest in her eyes. Poor Ita, she tried hard to be very good, and not to care too much about the money; but she was not stoical. Edgar was in delicate health. He had given up his profession because she had become a Catholic. She could not help feeling very anxious. If they were tolerably well provided for, she could easily make up her mind, should Edgar think it right, never to raise the question of her birth, but to be all their lives dependent on Annie for everything beyond bare subsistence. She could hardly face the thought with courage. All this passed through her mind during the brief moment while the will was unsealed. The contents of it were short and simple. She bequeathed her furniture, books, pictures, plate, and jewels to her niece, Annie Derwent, and her fortune—that is, a sum of twenty thousand pounds—to her nephew, Edgar Derwent. This was all right—what every one had expected. Ita breathed a deep sigh of gratitude. Mrs. Langdon fanned herself. Edgar glanced at his wife. Annie seemed to take no notice.

"But there is a codicil," the lawyer said;

and this codicil, made and signed a few days before her illness, revoked all previous provisions, and left everything the testatrix possessed to Mr. Walter Sydney.

Annie started. Mrs. Langdon groaned, her husband shrugged his shoulders. Ita became crimson, and looked at Edgar in an amazed, bewildered manner. There was nothing more to be said or done. The lawyer rose.

Edgar went up to him and said, "You will, of course, give notice as soon as possible to Mr. Sydney of the contents of the will?" Then approaching Annie, he began, "Dearest Annie, this is unexpected. . . ."

"I have left off expecting anything or caring for anything," she answered. "Perhaps you will give the necessary orders that everything that belonged to my aunt may be packed up and sent . . . . Oh, Edgar," she suddenly cried, "why did she do this?"

"Come with me, Annie," he said; "come with me into the next room. Let us talk about it."

He was excited, and proposed this, scarcely knowing what he should say if she consented; but she hastily drew away her

hands, which he had seized, and dashed them across her eyes to hide the tears that were filling them, and rushed out of the room. Edgar fell on the sofa, and hid his face with his arms. His wife sat down by his side, close to him, not venturing to speak. The same idea was in both their minds. They had a vague suspicion that this extraordinary will must be in some way connected with Mrs. Gerald's recent knowledge or suspicion of the facts which had come to their own knowledge. But what the consequences would prove, what the effect would be on Annie of this new wound to her feelings, they could not imagine or foresee. They intensely longed to be by themselves; both had a terror of hearing Mrs. Langdon speak. But they could not remain where they were, they must make a move. Edgar rose and said, "We had better go now. Only I should like to make one more attempt to see Annie." He wrote her a note and sent it up to her room—

"DEAREST ANNIE,—Do let me or Ita see you. It makes me so unhappy that you will shut yourself up."

In a moment the servant returned with this one :—

"Dearest Edgar,—Believe me it is not unkindness. At this moment I could not be unkind to you. But I can only bear things when I am alone. People are different, you know."

"There is nothing for it," he murmured, and led the way out of the room.

As soon as they were outside the house, Mr. Langdon exclaimed, "Well, if that good lady's intention was to surprise and puzzle the world after her death, she has succeeded."

Mrs. Langdon, who was quivering with indignation, and grieved with natural sorrow, answered with a violent calmness, "I am not the least surprised, and not the least puzzled."

"Good Heavens!" Edgar inwardly exclaimed, "does she suspect anything?" And he turned round rather anxiously awaiting her next words,

"It is as clear as the day!"

"Then she knows nothing," he thought.

"You said last night, when we were surprised at those people having been asked to the funeral, that Mrs. Walter Sydney"—the emphasis with which the name was uttered was quite terrific—"had been often with your poor aunt during her illness. I have not the slightest doubt on my mind that she made her secretly a Roman Catholic, and persuaded her to leave them her fortune, that she may make it over to the priests. It is just what they all do. It is exactly what one might have expected."

"But if she wanted to enrich the Papists," Mr. Langdon observed, "she might as well have made Mrs. Derwent her heir."

"No, the priests would not then have had it. But, Edgar, of course you will contest the will. A codicil made just before a person is taken ill, and her having had a paralytic stroke, too, and lost her speech, and such a will as that—of course it could never stand. She must have been out of her mind. Indeed, for her sake I am sure I hope so. I did not see her often; but it always struck me there was something very odd about her. I hope this will be a lesson to you, my dear

Margaret. It is an awful instance of the power and cunning of your priests."

This sort of conversation, or rather soliloquy, went on all the rest of the day. The husband and wife could scarcely escape a minute from poor Mrs. Langdon's presence. Ita felt painfully her mother-in-law's remarks; but it was an immense, unspeakable comfort that her own secret was now known to Edgar, and that the shafts, whether at random sent, or pointed towards herself, were warded off by the sense of his sympathy. The suspense, however, was most trying. Only twice they got away alone—once into the garden, and once to her room at dressing time. On the former occasion, he had just begun saying, "My love, I cannot but think . . . ." and she was hanging breathlessly on his lips to hear what he did think, when steps were heard behind them, and Mrs. Langdon rushed into the shrubbery with a newspaper in her hand.

"My dear boy" (it always tried Ita that she would call her great grown-up son, a man of twenty-eight, her boy), "I have just seen this account in the 'Standard,' of the

way in which a Romish priest in France induced a Jewish girl to become a Papist. It shows what they can do."

"My dear mother," Edgar impatiently exclaimed, "there is not the slightest reason to believe that my poor aunt died a Roman Catholic; and whatever may have been the cause of her making this extraordinary will, the Sydneys are not people that can be suspected of interested plotting in the matter."

"I do not see that at all. They may not want money themselves, though there is nobody too rich not to care for more. But they will give it to build churches and convents. To think of poor Mrs. Gerald having been so foolish—so wickedly foolish! It makes me quite afraid of what one might do oneself. The pictures, too—all the pictures of her own relatives—to go and leave them to strangers. I wonder how she can rest in her grave."

This sort of talk went on as long as the walk round the shrubbery lasted, only interrupted by inefficient efforts on the part of Edgar to check its flow.

"Well, the longest day comes to an end,"

he said to his wife, as he passed through her room before dinner. Mr. and Mrs. Langdon were to return to London by the eight o'clock train the next morning. They neither of them could understand the feelings of the young couple, and this was natural enough. It did really seem above human nature that they should not be more indignant or distressed at the terrible disappointment they had experienced, and should not utter one word of resentment, or even amazement, at Mrs. Gerald's unaccountable, and apparently unjust testamentary disposition.

"Do you really think, Mr. Langdon, Edgar will not dispute the will?" she said, as they drove in the pony-chaise to the station.

"I am like poor Miss Derwent," he answered, lifting up his eyebrows, "I have left off thinking at all."

After the early breakfast, and the departure of their parents, Edgar and Ita, with a strange sense of relief, set themselves, on the contrary, to think as hard as they could, half to themselves and half aloud. For all their thoughts did not turn on the same subject,

Ita revolved in her mind the possibility of what Mrs. Langdon had so indignantly concluded. Perhaps, Mrs. Gerald *had* wished, had intended, to be a Catholic. Perhaps, the wistful, appealing look, so constantly fixed upon her, had been the expression of that desire. She remembered, with a thrill of grateful joy, the pressure of her poor thin hand when she had asked her if she believed whatever God had revealed to his Church; but she questioned if she ought not to have said more, and done more, and hoped more, for that departing soul. Alas! how often we have to go over, in remembrance, scenes in which, if we could be placed in them again, we think we should act differently. This may be sometimes true, but as often not. No one is safe from these misgivings; but may we not trust that, where the whole desire of our souls has been to do right, He will have made all things, even our own mistakes, our blindness, our folly, perhaps, subservient to his purposes of mercy? Ita wondered that Margaret Sydney had not spoken to her, on the Sunday she spent with her, of her frequent visits to Mrs. Gerald. She

longed immensely to see her on every account. Edgar's thoughts ran anxiously on the future. He could not but believe that Mrs. Gerald's will had been made in consequence of doubts as to the real state of the case as regarded Ita and Annie, and that, foreseeing the impossibility of investigating the point at issue before her death, she had confided those doubts to the Sydneys, and left her property as a trust in their hands.

After a long silence, he broke on Ita's thoughts by exclaiming, "Of course, if she foresaw that you would ever be acknowledged to be the rightful possessor of Holmwood, she must have wished to leave her fortune to Annie. But what will be the next step?"

"Do you still mean to go to London and see Madame Ranolfi?"

"I am inclined to do so. It seems to me that we ought to get together all the evidence we can, and then form a decision."

"Mrs. Sydney asked me yesterday if we would not both come to Grantley Manor for a while. I said I would speak to you about it and let her know; but at this moment it

would be, I suppose, very embarrassing, even if you had no objection . . . ."

"I could not go there under any circumstances," Edgar quickly replied. He was conscious that his misery about Ita's change of religion was less keen, and that he was beginning to care about it much less than at first. In spite of himself, other anxieties and cares, he scarcely allowed himself to call them hopes, blunted the edge of what had at first seemed so acute. But when it was proposed to him to go and stay at Grantley Manor, he felt he must make a stand.

"You might have gone there whilst I was in London," he added, "if it had not been for this complication. The whole state of affairs is so strange, what with what we know and what we do not know, that it quite bewilders one. And that dear, dear one there—our poor Annie . . . . for whom I have such a strong affection . . . . Oh, my own Ita, will others ever know who she is and who you are!"

This was said with all his old tenderness. The tight feeling in her heart was loosened. The joys of other days beamed in

her eyes; she rested her head on his shoulder; she looked at the view of Holmwood House, and at the windows of Annie's solitary home, that home she had once reckoned on sharing with Edgar. How could she ever make amends to that poor lone being? Surely not by driving her from that very home.

"Oh! God will find a way out of it!" she exclaimed, with a sort of childish faith which made her husband smile. He had guessed what had passed through her mind.

"Oh, I hope this is not somebody coming to call here at this hour," she exclaimed, when, as the stable clock was striking eleven, a carriage was heard driving up to the door.

Edgar looked out of the window. "It is Mrs. Sydney," he said, and both felt a little agitated.

Margaret Sydney was one of those persons to whom God has given one of his best and highest natural gifts—a sunny, sweet temper; and his Holy Spirit had engrafted upon that charming nature its fruits of charity, joy, benignity, and goodness. In youth her presence had been a sunbeam; in maturer

age it had ever proved a light in darkness to the sorrowful, a sheltering cover to the helpless. The gladsome spirits that had made Grantley Manor and Heron Castle ring with merriment in former days, had been subdued, never saddened. She had been happy as the day is long with her old Walter—the chosen husband of her heart; she had borne away from the death-bed of her sister Ginevra the Catholic faith, that well-spring of happiness which does not ebb with age; and she had gone on her way rejoicing through the sunshine and clouds of many a long year, "her children rising up and calling her blessed, and her husband praising her." Wherever she went, peace seemed to follow—whatever she did seemed to prosper.

As she came in to the little drawing-room of the Vicarage, there was a kindness in her glance, something in her manner which conveyed sympathy without expressing it, that at once dispelled the embarrassment of those she came to see. They felt there was nothing but good-will in that heart. Ita thought she would be "the way out of it" God would

find. She sat down by her, and Edgar stood near them.

"Do sit down," she said, "we have so much to talk about. I have so much to tell you."

First she gave them an account of the intimacy which had sprung up, whilst they were in Italy, between her and Mrs. Gerald. "She liked me to come and see her very often, and always talked to me a great deal about you." This she said turning to Ita, whose heart was beating fast.

"She was very fond of you . . . ." Margaret hesitated, and looked earnestly at Ita, who turned red and then pale. "Ever since she had known you she thought you like a picture in her room? . . . . Do you know the one I mean?"

Edgar had turned away, and stood at the window with his back to them. Margaret put her arm round Ita's waist, drew her close to herself, and said, "Do you at all guess what else she fancied?"

"Oh yes, we know about it. You need not be afraid to speak," Ita answered, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Well, then, I will at once tell you that she had been long tormented by the consciousness of this extraordinary likeness, and since she heard from Lady Emily where you were found in infancy, the impression grew so strong that she could never shake it off again, and it made her quite miserable. I feel that I am at liberty to tell you now all that she said to me in confidence; for the last time we ever met, her last words to me were, 'If I should die suddenly, do as you think right about making use of all I have told you.' Well, there had been in her mind a misgiving throughout that it was not absolutely certain that Annie was her niece. She had so passionately wished to believe it at the time, that with her naturally anxious mind, she kept fearing this might have influenced her. Still the fact about the initials on the clothes did seem quite conclusive." (Edgar and Ita glanced at each other.) "And then two persons, you know, on oath had borne testimony to Annie's identity. I used to remind her of this, but she would argue with me by the hour, that your likeness to Mrs. Derwent was so striking, your voice, your

way of walking, many little peculiarities about you so remarkable, that she could not help being distracted with doubts and misgivings. By Walter's advice I suggested to her to try, as secretly as possible, to procure any possible further evidence on the subject; and if this did not succeed, to let the matter alone, as it would be cruel to raise a question which there would be no means of solving. She did, I believe, make some inquiries."

"I suppose," Ita said, "that she must have been the person who, under the name of Dallas, wrote to the priest at Colla."

"Yes; I now remember that she said so. It was painful to observe how this anxiety took more and more possession of her mind, and poor Annie must have suffered from it also. Sometimes, as if to make up to her for her misgivings, she used (this she told me herself) to show her all the same passionate affection she had felt, and in some sense did, I think, still feel, for her; but at others, though she reproached herself intensely for it, there came over her a terrible coldness—a feeling that Annie was occupying the place of her own brother's child. I am

afraid this was sometimes so strong that Annie was astonished and angered at her manner to her."

"Poor, poor Annie!" Edgar ejaculated, "it was, then, perpetual self-reproach that tormented Mrs. Gerald."

"She knew herself to be in a very precarious state of health, and was uneasy about her will. Her idea was that if the question was never raised about you and Annie, and she remained in possession of Holmwood and the Derwent property, she should of course wish to leave Mr. Derwent her fortune; but, on the other hand, if Annie was ever proved not to be her brother's child, she was of course most anxious to provide for her. She was often contriving expedients to meet this difficulty, but they all seemed open to some objections. She proposed at last what she has actually done, and said that she should leave it to us, to do the best we could under the circumstances. I am come to consult with you both on the subject. Walter would have come, but he is laid up with the gout. Now tell me . . . . what do you think? You see there is nothing to go upon

but her own impression. I see myself the likeness she spoke of in the strongest manner . . . . but, of course, there is no proof in that . . . ."

"Dear Mrs. Sydney," Ita said in a low voice, "there are other proofs, though I do not know if they would be conclusive."

She then gave her the various details connected with Mariana's history, and Madame Ranolfi's narrative; and told her of the initials on her own baby clothes.

Margaret listened with eagerness, and when she had heard all, drew a deep breath, and said, "I do not see how there can be a doubt on the point, though, of course, I do not know if it could be legally proved. Oh, Ita," she exclaimed, throwing her arms round her neck, "how strange it seems. I wonder what poor Mrs. Gerald would have done if she had known all this?"

"I cannot help thinking she knew part of it. I saw on her table, the day she was taken ill and you brought me back, a letter which I am almost sure was from Madame Ranolfi, and some days before one directed to *Mrs. Dallas*."

"Should we find them, I wonder?"

"We put them in her bureau the day after her death—Annie then took charge of the keys."

"She sent over that bureau and everything that could be moved at a moment's notice, last night to Grantley Manor. We can look for them when I go home. If she did receive some intelligence decisive to her own mind as to that question, I can quite conceive that the shock may have killed her. The reaction of her feelings about Annie, even while it was only a suspicion, was sometimes so strong—the possibility of having ever to disown and, as it were, despoil her, was like an oppressive nightmare to poor Mrs. Gerald. I remember her saying to me one day, 'I could never, under any circumstances, make up my mind to utter the words that would ruin my poor dear child. If it must be known, let it be when I am dead.' Yet all the time there was a yearning tenderness towards you. I think she was more convinced than she even owned to me that you were her niece. There certainly was never a more extraordinary

complication of circumstances, or a more distracting one to a nature like hers. Her feelings about Holmwood were so strong, too. I suppose that codicil was a sort of expedient to satisfy her conscience."

"How terribly she must have suffered!" Edgar said, "no wonder she looked so careworn, and sometimes so sad."

"Walter told me to say, Mr. Derwent, that of course what Mrs. Gerald left in trust to him till some change happens, that is, the interest of the twenty thousand pounds, is at your disposal. If the truth is ever positively known and acted upon, then we would make over that sum to Annie with the arrears. This was what he suggested."

"I cannot look forward to dispossessing her; I do not see how we *could* do it," Edgar exclaimed, looking at his wife.

"And why should we?" she eagerly answered, "especially now that we are so well provided for."

"I suppose it is a very difficult question," Margaret said.

"Ita trusts in God to show us a way out of it," he said with an affectionate smile.

"Meanwhile, I think I ought to get all the evidence I can. We should satisfy our own minds as much as possible on the subject. I mean to go to London to-morrow and see this Mrs. Ranolfi."

"And I will look over poor Mrs. Gerald's papers. May Ita come to me while you are in London?"

"Yes, most willingly, if only you will both look after poor Annie, and, if possible, get her to see you. She is in a sad state, a dull, hard, hopeless dejection."

"We will drive over every day till we succeed."

Before Mrs. Sydney went away, Ita took her into the garden, and asked her if Mrs. Gerald had shown any disposition to become a Catholic.

"I cannot exactly say she did," was her reply. "She had a great craving for Confession. She often told me that in her state of mind it would be an unspeakable comfort to disclose her doubts and anxieties to a priest. 'This shows one so much,' she used to say, 'how vain it is to talk of Confession to Anglican clergymen. How could

I speak of such a secret and important thing as this to men who hear confessions on their own authority, and whose fitness for it has not been tested and examined as is the case with your priests. Take me, for instance, at this moment—I must either send for a complete stranger, whom no bishop, nobody but himself, has empowered to act as a confessor, or for some clergyman I know. There is not one I am acquainted with in whom I could put such confidence, or who would indeed agree to hear a confession in your sense of the word, except Edgar himself. With you it is so different. How can confession be safe in a Church in which it is not authorized?' "

"But still she did not wish to see a Catholic priest?"

"Sometimes she spoke of it; at one moment I really thought she meant to do so, but she put it off. Human respect, I think, prevented it; the dread of Annie's surprise and the remarks of the servants."

"I hope," Ita said, "and yet . . . . I ought not perhaps to say I hope, she did not wish it when it was too late, for God may

have accepted the desire for the act. If I had only asked her that question!"

"Dearest Ita, God is our loving and kind Father. If that thought was in her mind during those speechless hours, it may have been his will that she should expiate, by the inability to express it, her delay in seeking that grace. There are so many persons now who mean some day or other to be Catholics, who believe that if there is any true Church it is the Catholic Church, and who put off, day by day, taking the decisive step. It makes one so anxious for them. In this case, those hours of consciousness, that pressure of the hand twice repeated which you told me of, fill one with hope. I suppose, dearest, that you guessed the secret of that extraordinary will? If you had had no suspicions, how strange it would have seemed to you. By the way, do you think any idea of the kind has ever crossed Annie's mind?"

"I cannot tell: I should think not; and if so, how hurt she must be."

"How can we prevent her sending us the pictures, and the plate and books? Do you think I might write her a line to say that I

hope she will not do so till I have had an opportunity of speaking to her. The worst is, that she must be, I think, very much embittered against us."

"I think you had better not write to her to-day. Edgar will try and see her this afternoon, and he might say something about it from you."

"Yes, beg him to do so. I shall come and fetch you to-morrow. Will it be your parting with this house?"

"Yes," Ita answered, her eyes filling with tears. "I could hardly have believed I could have borne it so quietly; but whatever happens, it is well that Edgar's mind is so taken up with these important thoughts just now. It seems to break the pain of our parting with this place. And our future now, after all, is a bright one. But that dear Annie, what is to become of her?"

CHAPTER XVI.

Some time had elapsed since the conversation related in the last chapter. Edgar Derwent had been to London, had seen Madame Ranolfi, and heard from her lips the same statement she had made to Ita, and which was contained also in a letter found in Mrs. Gerald's bureau. From the date of this letter, it seemed probable that the agitation it must have occasioned to a mind and a frame already much weakened, had led to the seizure which had ended in death. By the sick woman's desire, the priest, who had attended her since she had left the Anglican home, saw Edgar, and assured him that he believed the statement to be true, and Madame Ranolfi perfectly in her right senses. By his advice he obtained from her a formal statement of the facts she had related, which

was read and signed before two witnesses. At the same time, Mr. Neville wrote to one of his friends at Mentone, who procured an attestation from Antonia, the housekeeper at the Villa Hendon, that the clothes marked with the initials "A. D.," which were in Ita's possession, were the same which Giovanni Piombo had declared on oath to be those which she wore when he had picked her up at sea. This was also confirmed by another old servant who had been in Lady Emily Hendon's service at the time that Ita came to live with her. The Abate Giovanni took down at the same time, in writing, the facts which seemed to have remained impressed with some degree of accuracy in poor Mariana's memory, and the whole was sent to England.

Edgar then made up his mind to consult, in strict confidence, some lawyer, and, after a little hesitation, resolved to lay the subject before his stepfather. He knew him to be not only a very able man and clever lawyer, but also perfectly honest. He did not like him, but this seemed, at this moment, a minor consideration. He had not the least

apprehension that he would reveal anything on the subject to Mrs. Langdon. Besides his professional obligation to secresy, he was the last man who would have told a woman a secret, and his wife the last woman to whom he would have confided one. So Edgar went one morning to Lowndes Square, and, to Mrs. Langdon's infinite surprise, was shut up for three hours with her husband.

To his great amazement, Edgar found that Mr. Langdon was far more interested than astonished at the facts he mentioned to him. Some idea had crossed his mind more than once, that the evidence on which Annie's identity had rested was not perfectly satisfactory. When, as she grew up, not the least likeness to any member of the family had been discernible, he had frequently pondered on his original misgivings. With a lawyer's keenness, he had often balanced in his mind the possibility of proving that Edgar was the real heir to the Derwent property. When the marriage between him and his supposed cousin was arranged, there seemed little object in pursuing this idea. When it was broken off, and his engage-

ment to Ita Flower announced, and his wife lamented over his marriage to a girl whose parentage was unknown, and who had been picked up at sea on the coast of Italy, he mentally ejaculated, "What are the odds, I wonder, that *she* is not the real girl?" Neither he nor his wife had seen or heard of Mrs. Robert Derwent's picture; but it so happened, as he had told Ita the last time he was at Holmwood, that he had known that lady before her marriage, and been struck with her beauty. The first time Miss Flower had been introduced to him after her engagement to Edgar, he observed her likeness to the pretty Maud Ardon he had once so much admired, and then he said to himself, "Now, I should not mind taking odds that she *is* the real girl."

When all the evidence, as it now stood, was placed before him, he rubbed his hands, and said, "Well, my dear sir" (he had never been on a familiar footing with his step-son)," I suppose we may prepare for a *cause célèbre*, that will keep for months, or years, perhaps, all England in suspense. Possession on the one hand, Mrs. Gerald's constant

belief in Miss Annie's identity, and the testimony of competent witnesses having supported it at the time; on the other hand, this Italian Madame's declaration. But, then, you know, you might have bribed that person; then the initials on your wife's nightgown, ay, and her likeness to the picture—but people differ so much about likenesses! No; it is not strong in point of law. And then, O Lord bless us! your wife has *turned*, is a Papist, and Miss Annie a staunch Protestant. It would be Protestant *versus* Catholic! There would not be a chance of getting a verdict in our favour!"

"I quite agree with you, and I scarcely like to say, after your decided opinion that we should not succeed, that we have never thought of trying the case."

"*I* never said you should not try it. More evidence, might, perhaps, be obtained in Italy. That Caterina may have spoken to others besides Madame Thingabob. Then, will Mrs. Sydney bear witness to Mrs. Gerald's doubts? Only she is a Papist again—a plague on it! She would, of course, be in the plot. Mrs. Gerald's will would go

some way, however, in supporting her evidence. No; you must not give it up in a hurry. There is a good deal against your establishing your wife's claim, but it is not hopeless."

"But what I mean is, that neither Ita nor I can bear the idea not only of going to law about it, but even of letting Annie know of this doubt. You must remember how excessively kind she has been to us; and yet you do *not* know all we owe her."

"Oh, if it is an affair of sentiment, do not talk to me," Mr. Langdon replied, taking a pinch of snuff. "I have nothing to say to those sort of considerations. They are out of my line. Please yourselves."

"As to a trial, that is impossible; but it had occurred to me that, if the whole matter was laid before Annie, she might agree to submit the point to arbitration—to the judgment of a certain number of straightforward, unprejudiced men, who would examine the evidence, and . . . ."

"Pooh, pooh! my dear sir; they would not agree. Unpleasantness, that significant word, would have been created, and no result

obtained. Better leave things as they are than that."

"Then they must remain as they are; I do not see how it can be helped."

"And if Miss Annie, when she has got over this fit of moping—remember she is only twenty-two or twenty-three, which is it?—takes into her head to marry some low scamp . . . ."

"She would never do that."

"And why should not she? There is nobody to care for, or to look after her. I cannot conceive a more wretched creature than an heiress without a scrap of a relative to see that she is not snapped up by some adventurer . . . ."

"You forget that we are both devotedly attached to her."

"But she won't see you. Now you have given up your living, you will live somewhere else. There she will stay in solitary grandeur till some vulgar attorney, or the old doctor, or a foreign count, perhaps, make their way to Holmwood, and a family of children of that ilk perpetuate the old line of the Derwents."

All this was very disagreeable; but there was some truth in it. Annie, with fifteen hundred a year, would probably be a happier person than with the responsibility of a property of twelve thousand a year. But would she think so herself? Once she might; but now she was changed, estranged, and it was impossible to foresee what the effect might be upon her of such a revelation as the one in question.

Edgar took leave of his stepfather, and parried all his mother's endeavours to discover what they had been talking of. He told her, however, that Mrs. Gerald's fortune had been left in trust in Mr. Sydney's hands.

"And why could not you be trusted with your own money?" she not unnaturally exclaimed,

"There are certain arrangements involved in it," he answered, "that made this desirable. The Sydneys have been as kind as possible."

"I do not see what business they had with it at all. However, if you are satisfied, I have nothing more to say. I am quite contented."

Poor Mrs. Langdon neither felt nor looked the content she expressed, and brooded all day on the stupid way people had of making secrets of things.

It would have been too inconvenient not to go to Grantley Manor, for Edgar to persevere in his intention of declining for himself the invitation to join Ita. It was the only place, within reach of Holmwood, where they could stay for the present; and his duty with regard to Annie overbalanced other considerations. Week after week they lingered there, becoming every day more attached to the Sydneys, and feeling their hearts more touched by Walter's gentle, thoughtful goodness, and Margaret's overflowing kindness.

Ita was very grateful. Day by day she saw Edgar's prejudices diminishing. Now that he was removed for awhile from the scene of his labours, and from the ceaseless antagonism of Anglican dissensions, a softening influence stole over him. She saw that he read less controversy, that he wrote fewer letters to newspapers, but that he prayed more, and sometimes for hours

remained in the chapel on his knees before the altar with his face buried in his hands. He was very unhappy about Annie. She did not refuse to see him or Ita, either alone or together; but these visits seemed only to give her pain. She spoke little, and with effort. She looked wretchedly ill, and became alarmingly thin. He spoke to the servants and found that she ate hardly anything: all energy, all spirits seemed to have left her. She had generally a Bible by her side, but when he tried to talk to her about religion, she changed the subject.

Once she said, with a forced smile, "My only complaint against you is, that you took away the religion of my childhood. You destroyed my simple faith in the Bible, which I used to read, foolishly enough, as if it had dropped from the skies, and you did not give me any other instead."

Edgar felt deeply pained. "Dearest Annie," he said, "I tried to make you believe, as I did myself, in the Catholic religion taught by our Church."

She raised her dull, melancholy eyes, and said, "Your Church had taught me Protes-

tantism. But I did not mean to speak of that. I am too weak and tired to argue."

Some days elapsed, and one afternoon Edgar met the physician, who had attended the family at Holmwood for a great number of years. The old man said to him—

"Have you seen your cousin lately, Mr. Derwent? I was with her yesterday. I cannot help feeling very anxious about her. She will die if she does not make some change in her mode of life."

Edgar shuddered. It was a morbid fancy, but it seemed almost as if they were killing Annie; but what could they do?

The physician went on—"She neither sleeps nor eats; she never goes out; she does not come to church, though she could do so if she tried; she is not so weak as utterly prostrated. But it will end in atrophy; unless she has very soon change of air and scene, I cannot answer for the consequences."

"Have you told her so?"

"Repeatedly; but she always refuses, and when I try to alarm her she only smiles."

"I have also done my utmost," Edgar said, "but she will not even listen to me. She shuts my mouth directly, and seems hurt and annoyed if I persist."

"Who has influence with her?"

"Nobody," Edgar answered, with a sigh.

"She really is killing herself," the doctor rejoined.

Edgar did not say it aloud, but he thought, "That is, perhaps, what she intends."

As he entered the grounds at Grantley Manor, he saw his wife and the Sydneys sitting on a bench on the terrace. They were looking the picture of happiness. Margaret's last baby was on her knees, and Ita shaking before it a bunch of roses, the falling leaves of which the fat little hands were trying to catch. At each failure there were shouts of delight. Ita was blushing and laughing. Mrs. Sydney had just whispered to her, "By this time next year, a Master or Miss Derwent will, I hope, be catching rose-leaves here."

Edgar stopped, and mused on that picture, and on the one the old doctor had drawn of that Annie whom he had played

with as a child, whom he had always loved, whom he had been affianced to once, and who had always ever been to him the most faithful, devoted, and generous of friends. There was his blooming, lovely wife, whom Annie had given to him—to him her own betrothed. The hope of a great and holy joy was beaming in her face, and filling her heart with grateful happiness, his own with tender emotion. Once he would have told that news to Annie, and felt sure of her sympathy. Now, in presence of her great, stern grief, he had not felt courage to do so.

There they were happy — yes, for the cloud overshadowing their lives seemed to be gradually dwindling away in the light that was slowly dawning upon him. There they were, loving and loved, with kind friends and pleasant hopes; and there she was friendless and alone, a blight on her young life, a dark shadow on her heart; ill, weak, perhaps dying, and with no settled faith, no heavenly hopes. The contrast at that moment struck him so terribly, that, as he advanced towards them, both Mrs. Sydney and Ita were frightened at the expression of his countenance.

"Has anything happened?" Ita exclaimed.

"No," he said; "nothing. But I have met Dr. Lawrenson. He gives a sad account of Annie." He repeated what the physician had said, and there was a sad silence when he had done speaking. He seemed so deeply affected, that nobody was inclined to utter.

At last, old Walter, as his wife called him, with somewhat more justice then than in former days, said, "It strikes me that you are all making a very great mistake." They all looked towards him surprised. "Yes, it appears to me that you are letting this poor girl die, when you might save her life."

"What do you mean?" they all exclaimed.

"Why, I mean that you are afraid, because she is sad and weak, to tell her what might give her new life."

There was another silence; they anxiously listened for his next words, and Margaret's eyes sparkled with an expression that seemed to say, "Well done, old Walter!"

"If you look back to her past life you

must own that her ruling passion has been . . . ."

"Her love of Holmwood!" Edgar said, with a deep sigh.

"Not a bit of it. The desire to make Holmwood a blessing and a home for you. It is of no use not to speak out. Truth is always the best policy, in matters of feeling as well as of interest. Your marriage prevented Holmwood House from being your home. She created another for you, and circumstances have made you abandon it. It is quite as likely as not that, if she was to hear of the doubts that exist as to her own birth, and the likelihood that your wife is really the person she is supposed to be, it would be a relief to her."

"But then it might be just the contrary," Edgar said.

"There is another view of the subject," Mr. Sydney observed, "which I think you have all too much overlooked!"

"What is that?" Ita asked.

"Why, if you, Mrs. Derwent, are the daughter of the Robert Derwents, Annie must be the daughter of the poor woman at

Mentone. Are you justified, when there is such strong apparent evidence, that such is the case—to keep the child from her mother, the mother from her child?"

"Would it not be terrible for Annie?" Margaret asked. "Would it not be a painful struggle to have to own a mother in that rank of life?"

"What sort of person is she?" Walter Sydney asked, turning to Ita.

"She is very gentle, and pious, and refined, in her simple way, as Italians often are. If I thought she was my mother, I should not be at all reluctant to own her. What she has gone through has somewhat affected her memory, but not her understanding."

"I do not think I could ever have courage to let Annie know how the case stands," Edgar said.

"We must talk about it again later," Margaret replied. "I must now take baby home."

The next day, when Mrs. Sydney came down to breakfast, she found a letter on the table, which seemed, when she had opened it, to make her very thoughtful. After reading

it two or three times over, she gave it to her husband with a significant look, and was, contrary to her custom, grave, and absent as long as she remained in the breakfast-room. When she left it, Walter followed her into her own little den, as she called it. She immediately said to him, "Why do you think she wants to see me?"

"It is impossible to guess," he answered. "It may be that Mrs. Gerald's will preys on her mind, and gives her some suspicion. You had better go at once, Maggy, and if she gives you an opportunity, and, indeed, I should say, in any case, tell her the whole truth."

"You think so?"

"Yes; I think it would, at the same time, be well to make it appear, which indeed is the case, that there would not be, in all probability, sufficient evidence to invalidate her position in the eyes of the law. But I am sure it is fair and right to place the facts, just as we know them, before her. Indeed, I think it may be the means of saving her life."

"But if, on the contrary, I should do her harm?"

"Well, my dear love, you can only do the best you can. Her physician says she will die if something does not rouse her and change her present state of mind and mode of life. It is not from any selfish motives you will take this step; not even in the worldly interest of your friends; for if poor Annie was roused to some violent feeling of opposition by this disclosure, it might do what is wished, and benefit her health. It would be as well, however, if you were to stop on the way at Doctor Lawrenson's house. He is almost always at home till eleven. You would just catch him. Tell him that what he said to Edgar yesterday about Miss Derwent has made us all anxious. Ask his opinion as to the effect which an exciting and perhaps a painful subject of thought might have upon her, and act accordingly."

"Pray for me, that if I do speak, I may say just what I ought, and in the best way."

"Shall I order the pony-chaise for you?"

"Yes, and I suppose I had better not let the Derwents know anything about her note, and my intention of speaking to her?"

"Certainly not; it is kinder to them to take the responsibility on ourselves."

"I wish you could go instead of me."

"Not now that she has asked to see you; and then you forget my gouty foot. God bless you, little woman."

Mrs. Sydney drove up to the door of Doctor Lawrenson's house just as he was getting into his gig. They both went back into his parlour, and after talking some time about Annie's state of health, she put to him, confidentially, the question she wished answered.

He mused a little, and then said, "My dear Madam, to rouse her interest in anything, whether painful or not, is an object at this moment. I have no hesitation in saying that, if the present state of things lasts much longer, she will not live. It has struck me that the poor young lady must have something on her mind, beyond her grief for her good aunt's death. She ought to have change of some sort, and as she is too old to be carried out of the house against her will, a shock of any kind seems the only chance of rousing her. If she should seem

too much agitated by anything you may have to communicate, send for me. I shall be at home again in the course of the afternoon."

This opinion settled Mrs. Sydney's remaining doubts, and she made up her mind that speak she must: but sometimes a thing seems tolerably easy at a distance, which, when the moment draws near, becomes difficult, if not impossible. During the hour that it took to drive from the doctor's house to Holmwood, poor Mrs. Sydney felt every instant more intensely the difficulty of the task she had undertaken. If Annie did not lead to the subject, she began to doubt the possibility of broaching it. If she had felt this before she saw her, she was far more strongly impressed with it on entering the drawing-room, where poor Annie was sitting alone in an arm-chair, looking so pale, thin, and wan, and her eyes so unnaturally large, that she looked like the shadow of her former self. A short, nervous cough shook her feeble frame, and it required a strong effort on Margaret Sydney's part to suppress her emotion. Annie's greeting was, however, so cold and formal, that it enabled her to regain

composure. They spoke of indifferent things, and then Mrs. Sydney said, "You are not looking well; you really ought to take care of yourself, or to let us all take care of you. If I could only persuade you to come to us!"

"Thank you very much. I do not feel well enough to pay visits."

"But we have only got Edgar and Ita with us."

"Yes, I know they are staying with you."

"Will you not think of it?"

"No, thank you, I like better being at home."

The word struck on Mrs. Sydney's heart. "Could she bring herself to hint that Holmwood was perhaps not her home?"

"But you may become seriously ill, your doctor says so, if you have not change of air and scene."

"Much he knows about it. Besides . . . ." she paused, and a sudden emotion passed over the pale stern face.

"Besides what?" Margaret exclaimed, seizing Annie's cold hand, which was not

withdrawn though it did not return the pressure of her own.

No answer came.

"I can understand that it would be an effort to leave Holmwood . . . . It is looking so beautiful just now . . . ." she added, getting nervous, and hardly knowing what to say.

"Does it?" Annie listlessly asked.

"Do you really never go out?"

"No, I hate the sight of every thing here. I cannot bear to look at the churchyard where *she* is buried or at the house *they* have left. It is all hateful to me."

"Then why, oh, why will you not, why will you not leave it for awhile?"

"Because I want to go away for ever."

Margaret inwardly started. What did those words mean?

But Annie added in a low, hoarse voice, "Because I want to die."

Shocked and grieved, Mrs. Sydney said, "Oh dear, dear child, do not say that, it is wrong to throw away health, to seek death in that way. Why do you wish to die?"

"Because I have nothing to live for. I can make nobody happy, and I am in the way of other people's happiness. I know I must not kill myself; people of all religions agree in that, I believe; but I do not see why I should try to live."

"We have all something to live for," Mrs. Sydney gently said, still holding her hand.

"That is what people say, I do not see it myself; but you must wonder why I asked you to come."

Again Margaret's heart began to beat fast.

"The fact is that you are the only person, I think, who can tell me why my aunt, who loved me so much . . . ." here Annie's voice trembled, "took a dislike to me at last . . . ."

"I am sure she did not," Mrs. Sydney earnestly said.

"She did, she was quite altered. Sometimes at least. She did nothing but stare at Ita the last days of her life, and why did she leave you those things which you do not want a bit? If she would only have let me think she loved me as she used to do. I was so accustomed to it . . . ."

"You miss her affection, her unbounded devotion to you . . . . you feel very lonely don't you?"

There was an effort on Annie's part to suppress her tears, but it would not do, poor child! She lifted up her voice and wept long and bitterly. She had disliked Mrs. Sydney for no other reason than because she was a Catholic; otherwise she would have felt well disposed towards her. She knew that the fortune bequeathed to Mr. Sydney had been made over to Edgar. She was more puzzled than displeased at the strange provisions of her aunt's will, in which it was evident the Sydneys were not personally interested. Her tears flowed unrestrainedly for some time, and Mrs. Sydney ventured to kiss her brow.

"How hot your head is," she said.

"Do you think I shall die . . . .?"

"No, I do not; you are young, you ought to live."

"I wish I was dead."

"You must not say that."

"Why not? There is nobody who would be sorry if I was to die, and they are the worse for my living . . . ."

"Are you speaking of Edgar and Ita?"

"Yes; it would be a blessing for them if I was dead. Oh, if you knew how I hate this place I once was so fond of. The sound of the river worries me at night so that I cannot sleep. The cawing of the rooks distracts me, and when the agent comes to speak to me about business, I loathe the sight of him. I never was like other girls. I never cared for many people. I was happy those two years that they lived in the Vicarage, and that I worked in their garden. That was the sort of life that suited me. I felt my aunt loved me, and I was making Edgar happy and comfortable. Oh, I wish I could die."

Margaret had been inwardly praying for the last few minutes, and then she said very quietly, "I could tell you something that would astonish you very much. That would explain what has puzzled you, but I hardly know if I can venture to do so."

Annie turned her large wondering eyes upon her.

"It may startle you very much—pain you, perhaps; and yet . . . ."

"What can it be?"

"Mrs. Gerald had some doubts, especially quite at last, whether . . . ." Mrs. Sydney felt her voice failing her, a nervous sensation in her throat, as if she could hardly get out the words—"whether you were, after all, her niece, her brother Robert's daughter." She raised her eyes apprehensively to Annie's face. Her countenance had not changed, though she looked surprised.

"And who did she suppose I was, then?"

"Do you wish me to tell you all I know on the subject?"

"Yes, very much."

"She had made sure you were Annie Derwent, because you were saved out of the ship on board of which her brother and his wife perished, and you wore a night-gown marked with the initials 'A. D.,' which she recognized as being one of those of her infant niece. Two persons, also, who came from Florence to Genoa, swore that you were Mr. Derwent's child."

"Well, and what made her doubt it, then?" As she asked this, two deep crimson spots rose in Annie's pale cheeks. She

was beginning to understand what the question involved.

"It is a long story," Mrs. Sydney said, for she was anxious not to mention at once Ita's name. "Mrs. Gerald was struck with an extraordinary likeness between her sister-in-law and a person . . . ."

A sudden emotion shook Annie from head to foot. She seized violently hold of Mrs. Sydney's arm, and gasped out, "Between the picture in her room and Ita?"

Mrs. Sydney did not reply.

"Have I not seen that myself?" Annie continued, rather wildly; "have I not been struck with it over and over again? and thought what an extraordinary likeness there was between her fate and mine—that we should have both been saved from drowning in such a strange way, and that she should be so like what my mother must have been. But are there any other proofs . . . ."

Mrs. Sydney then went on, as calmly and as clearly as she could, under the circumstances, relating the various facts which formed a chain of evidence conclusive enough to an impartial mind. When Mariana was

mentioned, Annie again coloured violently, and drew a deep breath. She had trouble to attend to the details of the narrative. She was evidently musing, in a scarcely collected manner, on the results of this astounding communication, and became very excited.

"I should be so glad," she said, "I should be so glad. I wonder if it is quite sure."

Mrs. Sydney hesitated a little about speaking of the mark on the shoulder which Mariana had mentioned. On the whole, she thought it would be better to leave nothing unsaid.

"There is one circumstance, dear Annie, which might, perhaps, still further corroborate this evidence: Mariana told Ita that her child had fallen on something sharp when she was a little baby, and that the mark of that accident would have been likely to remain."

"Was it on the shoulder?"

"Yes, on the right shoulder."

"Then there is no doubt at all about it. I have a mark of that kind, not very distinct now, but it used to be so. They said I must

have been hurt in the ship. I remember its being talked about when I was little. Look if you can see it."

Mrs. Sydney did as she wished, and found the faint trace of something like a mark on Annie's shoulder.

"There can be no doubt now, I suppose," Annie again repeated, her cheeks very much flushed, and in a nervous voice. "Will you send for Ita. I want to see her. I want to look at the picture again. Then Holmwood would be theirs at once?"

"No, no; not at once. There would be much to be considered. It is something to think of quietly."

"Yes, yes—to think of a great deal. Did you say that that poor Mariana is at Mentone? I wonder when I can see her. Do not go away, Mrs. Sydney. I cannot be left alone now. Will you send for Edgar and Ita? I want to speak to them. And will you come up with me and look at the picture? I understand now my poor aunt's will. But she is not my aunt, if this is true. It seems very like a dream. I do not want to awake. It is as if I had been dead for some weeks,

and was beginning to be alive again. Will you write a note, and tell them to come?"

Margaret thought it wisest to comply with the request, and felt a natural desire to be helped in the difficult task of calming Annie's mind, which from the deepest apathy had suddenly passed to a feverish excitement, the effects of which, in her weak state, were to be dreaded.

She insisted on reading over and over again Madame Ranolfi's letter, and that of the priest at Colla, which Mrs. Sydney had brought with her. But what had taken most hold of her mind was the thought of Mariana. Margaret could not make out whether she feared most or rejoiced in the idea of finding in her a mother. It may be easily imagined with what feelings Edgar and Ita read Mrs. Sydney's short note.

"Dearest Ita,—I have told her all. She is very much excited—a little agitated, but does not seem at all unhappy; only too anxious to act in some way or other at once. She wishes you both to come immediately to her. All the apathy is gone. I am only

afraid of a reaction. Order the carriage, and come at once. I will go home when you arrive."

When Edgar and his wife reached Holmwood, Mrs. Sydney met them at the door. "I have sent for the doctor," she said. "I am a little anxious about Annie, I think she is at moments light-headed. She has insisted on *the* picture being brought to her room, and has been asking, every minute, if Ita has come."

"Let us go to her," Edgar said. "Oh, my God! I would give up Holmwood a thousand times over, and for ever, if I could see Annie well."

They did not see her well for many a long day, and, for a moment, it seemed little likely that she would recover. The sudden excitement produced a fever which affected her head, and poor Mrs. Sydney suffered intensely from the fear that she had endangered her life by informing her of the facts which were so greatly to influence her fate. But her old Walter always said that she had acted for the best, and that she should not grieve too

much, whatever the consequences might prove. At last there came a favourable turn in the illness. During the whole course of it, Annie had not suffered Mrs. Derwent's picture to be out of her sight. She had ordered it to be placed so that she could see it from her bed. Her eyes were constantly turning towards it, or looking at Ita, whom she often asked for. When light-headed, she also kept saying that she wanted her mother. The maids thought it was the presence of the portrait that put this into her head. "Poor young lady!" one of them said to Ita, "now that her aunt is dead, she thinks her mother must be alive. Well, she is left very lonesome, to be sure!"

One evening, Edgar and Ita were sitting in the next room, while the servants had gone down to supper, and they heard her saying, in a low voice, "Edgar, I want to go to my mother."

Ita put her finger on her lips, and the tears came into her eyes. Edgar went gently up to the bedside and said, "Dearest Annie, you must get well first, and then we will do all you wish."

She stared at him, and then began, to his great surprise, to hum a little song, which her Italian nurse had taught them both when they were children, but which they had not thought of for years.

"Se Moneca te fai,
To frate me farò,
Ma che tu lo farai
Nol credo, no Oibo!"

The words sounded strangely on the lips of the sick girl; but it showed that her mind was unconsciously running on Italy. Then she wandered off to something else, and soon afterwards fell asleep.

Edgar came back to his wife, and said, "Mr. Sydney has opened a letter this morning directed to Mrs. Gerald. As her executor, he had a right to do so, and it contains additional evidence that dear Annie is not her niece. It is from Caterina, and was written, or dictated, on her death-bed. Is it not strange that poor Annie should have hummed that song just now? The account Caterina gives, tallies exactly with the one Madame Ranolfi said she had heard from her. Whoever forwarded the parcel to England,

contented himself with true Italian nonchalance, with directing it to La Signora Gerald, Posta Restante, Londra. There it has remained for years. But, the other day, a friend of my stepfather's, while searching for a missing letter at the General Post-Office, saw this one, and sent it here. It contains the same particulars, given almost in the same words. I do not see how there can be any further doubt on the subject. I wonder if Caterina ever gave any hint of it to the servants here."

"I was going to tell you," Ita answered, "that Mrs. Marsden was speaking to me this morning of Annie's illness, and gave it as her opinion—you know her sententious manner—that the poor young lady had something on her mind, and she should not wonder if she had, for strange things had been sometimes mentioned by certain people. I continued to arrange the flowers as if I had not heard, and she went on to say that Caterina, Annie's Italian nurse, had let fall some curious hints about the hurry Mrs. Gerald had been in to acknowledge her as her niece, and that there were some might

have had a better right to stand in Miss Annie's shoes than herself. She had not taken notice of these speeches, for she never talked to anybody, but it had been always a stumbling-block to her—that is one of her favourite words—that their young lady should not be like any of the family. It was so contrary that she should have grey eyes and a square-like face, for the Derwents had always had blue eyes and round delicate faces. She also said that when Caterina was sent away, she flew out against the English in the steward's room, upon which she herself thought it right to tell her that she should consider it a fortunate day when there was no Italian in the house. 'For the matter of that,' says she, 'there may be one more Italian in the house than you think for,' and there she stopped."

"Caterina or Mrs. Marsden?"

"Caterina; but at that moment Annie sent for me, and my talk with Mrs. Marsden came also to an end."

Ita paused, and said, "Now I will tell you one thing more. I hope you will not mind my having done it, I was sorry for it

afterwards; it was the impulse of the moment. I was looking again yesterday—I am ashamed to say how often I do so—at the things and the shawl. When Mrs. Marsden came in to tell me the doctor was with Annie, I could not resist spreading out the shawl, so that she should take notice of it. She looked at it, and said, 'I have never seen you wear this shawl, ma'am. To be sure it is very faded and old, but a fine real Cashmere. I declare now, I remember that poor Mrs. Robert Derwent had just such a one in her trousseau.' Then I felt how foolish I had been, for I knew I looked as red and conscious as possible, and she must have seen it, and I suppose that is why this morning she began to speak about Caterina's hints."

Edgar looked grave. "It was almost a pity, I think, you let her see the shawl; and yet it will, it must, soon be necessary to compare and to weigh all the evidence on the subject. So, after all, it does not perhaps much signify. Still one had rather it should not be talked about till Annie is well, and herself takes the lead in the matter. I

wonder how far there have been any reports or surmises."

"Now that I look back I remember often feeling surprised that the servants here, the two or three old ones I mean, who have been in the family for twenty and thirty years, did not appear more fond of Annie. I attributed it to the *brusquerie* of her manner, for she is always good and kind to every one. But if any doubt was in their minds, it would account for it in another way."

"They may have had misgivings about her being my uncle's daughter, and yet never dreamed of anything concerning you."

"Yes; unless they had put together my likeness to the picture, and my being found at sea."

"Is that generally known, do you think? You never spoke of it to any one here, did you?"

"No, but your mother knows it, and so may her servants, and it may have reached them in other ways also."

"No doubt reports of that kind spread very quickly. Well, all we can do for the present, I think, is to remain quite passive,

and when Annie gets better we shall see what her wishes are, and act accordingly."

During the next few days Annie often made efforts to concentrate her ideas, and attempted to converse with Edgar and Ita, or Mrs. Sydney, but by the doctor's advice they discouraged these efforts; when she persisted in them her mind very soon grew confused, and wandered again. However, one morning, after a long and refreshing night's sleep, she awoke much better, and quite composed. That day, when Ita came to her bedside, she looked at her with some emotion, evidently wishing to allude to their mutual positions, but not knowing at all how to begin. At last she said, with a smile, "How shall we manage about our names?"

Ita only answered by kissing her.

"It is very odd it never occurred to me."

"How could it have done so, dearest Annie?"

"Oh, because I always thought you were like the picture; and then I had heard about your being found in that way at sea. I might have put it all together. I am so sorry I was taken for you . . . . but it is all right now

for all of us. But I am glad Mr. Pratt never knew of it. He is the only person who would have cared."

Ita burst into tears. These last words had affected her beyond what Annie herself felt or understood, for she looked surprised, and said, "I do not care, I am not sorry, you must not think I am sorry; on the contrary," then pausing a little she whispered, "I want you to tell me about my mother."

Ita hesitated a little.

"I mean Mariana, is not that her name?"

"Yes, Mariana Adorno."

"And what was I called?"

"Lucia."

Annie was again silent for a little while, then she said, "Tell me about her."

Ita spoke of the fair and gentle face she had seen and admired before she knew who Mariana was, and described how they had first met, and with delicate tenderness and tact touched on the poor infirm mother's yearning for her child, and her disappointment when she had to part with the little nightgown she had shown her. "That was

your nightgown," Annie said; "where is mine, I wonder?"

"Mrs. Sydney found it wrapt up and sealed in a parcel in Mrs. Gerald's bureau. She had written on it what it was."

"You must call *her* your aunt," Annie said, with a husky voice.

"*Our* aunt, dearest Annie. Oh, we must be, we are, sisters. There must be always such a strong tie between us who have been . . . ." she hesitated a moment, and Annie finished the sentence,

"In each other's places so long."

"I did not mean that," Ita exclaimed.

"No, I did not think you did."

"What I was going to say was, that we have both loved so much the same . . . ."

"I know, I know, but we will not talk of that now . . . ."

There are persons to whom the expression of some kind of feelings is almost impossible, and Annie's towards Ita were of that sort, strange and conflicting. She could not have put them into words. Ita, on the other hand, was longing to pour forth the affection and

sympathy with which her heart was overflowing, but the fear of wounding Annie's reserve restrained her from uttering all she felt.

Later in the day Annie sent for Edgar. She was not reserved with him, there was nothing now she wished to keep from him. The old intimacy of their earlier years seemed to return in that moment, and the look of her face when he came into the room was beautiful.

"I am so much better," she said; "I can now speak of all I have been thinking of, but which I was too weak to talk about till to-day."

"And you must not tire yourself now, my own dear Annie. I will go away if you do."

"No, it will not tire me to speak. I want to tell you that I am happier than I have been for a long time, that there is a great weight off my heart. You must take possession of Holmwood at once. You know it belongs to you and Ita. And I know you will give me a little cottage to live in, and I can work again in your garden."

"Dearest Annie, we shall settle everything later. If you wish it, compromise about

the property, as people call it, you will still be rich . . . ."

"No, no. I hate the trouble of it. If you knew how miserable I have been."

"Well, but you can be rich still, and have, if you like, no trouble about it."

"No, poor, and have no trouble about it. I have always thought I should be happy if I was a poor person and earned my bread."

"I am afraid we cannot let you do that," he said, smiling.

"I should like to make my mother comfortable. It seems so odd to be speaking of her. Ita says she loves me." Then after a pause, "Somebody said, oh it was before I was ill, that Holmwood is looking so beautiful. I am very glad, because now it is yours. You know I always wished that."

"But, my own dear Annie, we must wait. Nothing can be settled yet. When you are quite well we will lay it all before impartial persons, and they will advise us what to do."

"No, I will not have it submitted to anybody. You will make me unhappy if you do that. I had rather have it all settled

between ourselves, and you will give me enough to live upon."

"In the first place, dearest Annie, if you were not to keep this place and your present fortune, you would have £800 a year, which in that case Mrs. Gerald left you."

"I thought she had left it to the Sydneys."

"Only in trust for me or for you, as it might happen."

"God bless her!" Annie said, and tears rolled down her cheeks.

"But besides that, Annie, of course, you must have an ample income."

"Oh no, nothing more. Do not tease me, Edgar. Only I should like to make my mother comfortable as soon as I could."

"Ita has done it in some measure already, and we will arrange whatever you wish."

"That was very good of Ita. Edgar, I want to say something to you. I wish so much you had a child."

"I hope I may have one soon, dear Annie."

"Oh, is it so? That is good news."

She remained silent a moment, and then said, "My mother is a Catholic, I suppose?"

"Now really, dear Annie, you must not talk any more."

Annie nodded assent, folded her arms on her breast and closed her eyes.

Edgar, who was lingering by her side, heard her murmur to herself,

"I am very happy. It almost seems as if I was beginning a new life."

CHAPTER XVII.

Once more Ita was descending the winding road from La Turbia to Mentone, not with the exulting delight of the preceding year, but with a heart mellowed by suffering, strengthened by the light of a definite faith, full of a deeper courage and an intense gratitude, that the sorrows and fears which had threatened to darken her life had, in a great measure, passed away. Her conscience was at rest, and Edgar not estranged from her. She remembered the terrible words he had spoken, when the first idea of her intended change of religion had presented itself to his mind, and she blessed God, in the fervour of her soul, that her own courage had not failed, and that he had been patient and kind in their hour of trial.

Another great change had occurred in her

existence—the mystery of her birth had been solved since she had last gazed on that glorious view; she was no longer the unknown foundling of that blue silvery sea; she was Edgar's cousin as well as his wife; she was the acknowledged mistress of Holmwood House and its broad lands. The evidence, collected with care and strengthened by additional proofs, which, when the subject had been looked into, had been produced from several quarters, had been submitted to a chosen number of friends of the family and men of legal eminence, who had unanimously agreed that they were perfectly satisfied as to her identity. Persons who had known Mrs. Robert Derwent at her age bore witness, as well as her picture, to the likeness between them. The most eager advocate of Ita's claims was the actual possessor of the Derwent estates. On the day that she was to be confronted with the portrait of her mother, in presence of the arbiters of this singular question, Annie, who was still too weak to leave her room, had sent for her. She found her sitting on the sofa, with a blue scarf on her knees.

"Come here," she said, "I want to dress you up in a turban, as I did once before."

Ita knelt down by her side, for she saw it would vex her to refuse; but she could hardly help letting tears fall on the thin hands that were arranging her dress.

"Dearest Annie!" she murmured, "that you should be doing this to-day!"

A little tired, Annie leant back, and asked, "Am I at all like my mother?"

Ita was thinking at that very moment that the likeness, which had not been apparent when Annie was a healthy, rosy girl, had become striking since her illness. She kissed her hand fondly, and said, "Yes, you are a little like her."

"I am thinking of King Solomon."

Ita could not help smiling. "And what of him?"

"Nothing very wise; only it occurred to me that those good people who have come together to decide on what nobody has a doubt about, are going to say, not like Solomon, which of us two is to have a live child, but which is to have a living mother. My share will be the best, you will have the picture,

and I, a real mother . . . . Ita, I do so want to see her. I want to go to her! Will you tell Edgar so?"

And soon, very soon, as the cold weather set in, it was thought well, on every account, that Annie should be taken to a southern climate. Though better in some ways, she was very weak, and her cough did not leave her. She had recovered her spirits, but was restless and excitable. It was her express wish that Mariana should not hear of her existence till they could meet. One day she said to Ita, in a half-amused, half-melancholy manner, "I must get accustomed to my own name before I see her. She will call me Lucia! How strange that *my* name should be Lucia Adorno!"

"Edgar was saying yesterday that he hoped you would never call yourself by any other name than Annie. He could never call you anything else."

"Did he say so?" Annie asked, with one of her broad, pleased smiles. "And does he mean to go on calling you Ita?"

"Of course he does. It would puzzle him to death if we were to exchange names."

Annie laughed merrily, then suddenly becoming grave, she said, "What terrible things might have happened! Suppose he had married me, and all this had been found out afterwards!"

It was settled that as soon as Annie was strong enough to travel, they should all go to Mentone, and the Villa Hendon was ordered to be got ready for them. Edgar fancied that it might be painful to Annie to meet her mother at a place where she was known as a poor woman, and he proposed that they should take a house at Hyères, or at Cannes, and send for Mariana. But both Mrs. Sydney and Ita felt convinced she had no feeling of this kind, and that her mind had, moreover, fixed itself with a yearning desire on the idea of Mentone. She often said she did not care for France; she wished to live in Italy, and amused herself with learning from Ita some words in the Mentonese dialect.

At last they set out in the midst of what the French call the *petit eté de St. Martin*, a lovely season of the year in the South. And as they advanced on their

way, a real summer seemed to greet them. Lying in an invalid carriage, Annie saw all those new scenes rapidly passing before her eyes; the deepening azure of the Provençal sky, the lovely banks of the Rhone, the almost tropical vegetation of the shores of the Mediterranean. With a singular apathy she looked on all these things, and no expressions of surprise or of admiration rose to her lips. Ita was surprised and a little disappointed that the day they left Nice in a *voiturier* carriage she scarcely spoke at all. When they passed the promontory of Monaco, she asked if it was Mentone, and when Mentone became visible, and Ita pointed it out, her countenance showed some emotion; but she said nothing. When the carriage stopped at the gate of the villa she was too weak to walk across the garden to the house. Edgar and his servant carried her into the drawing-room, and placed her on a couch.

Annie closed her eyes a moment, and Ita bathed her forehead with eau de Cologne. In a minute or two she said,

"Now go and fetch my mother."

"Not this evening, do you think, dearest

Annie ? Had you not better wait till to-morrow ?"

"I have waited so long," she answered. "I *want* my mother."

Edgar and Ita looked at each other.

"We had better do what she wishes," he whispered to his wife.

"And what shall I tell her? . . . ." Ita said, gently bending over Annie.

"Nothing; only bring her here," she answered.

"Shall I stay with you ?" Edgar asked.

"No, dear Edgar, I had rather be alone. I feel quite well."

He went into the town with Ita. "This is an anxious moment," he said; "but on the whole, the meeting had better, perhaps, not be delayed."

As they entered the Via Lunga, Ita said, "This is where she lives," and stopped at a door near the gateway. "Will you wait here while I go in ?"

Mariana was sitting at her spinning-wheel near the window. She looked up when the door opened.

"Jesu mio !" she exclaimed. "The Sig-

norina Inglese!" And gentle words of endearment greeted Ita. "So you are come back to Mentone, dear lady. It is well, very well. Oh, what a joy to see your face again!"

"I am so glad to see you," Ita said, kissing her affectionately. "I have thought of you so often, and there is somebody with us at the Villa Hendon who has heard of you, and wishes so much to know you."

Mariana smiled.

"Tell me," asked Ita, "can you walk a little way without too much trouble?"

"With those two friends," Mariana answered, pointing to her crutches.

"Could you come as far as the Villa Hendon?"

"Yes, I could. I go sometimes to the chapel of Sant' Anna in the olive grove. But that reminds me, Signorina, is it true? oh, is it true what Pré Gian tells me, that you are now a *buono Christiana*—a real Catholic?"

"Yes, Mariana mia, indeed I am. God has been very good to me."

Mariana lifted up her eyes to heaven with

a mute but rapturous expression of joy. When Ita saw her face literally beaming with gratitude for her own return to the fold, she thought anxiously of the pain which would mingle with her happiness when she should find that Annie was a Protestant.

"Will you come with me, then?" she said, and Mariana rose and followed her, leaning on her crutches. They found Edgar standing near the door. This was the first sight he had of Annie's mother. He was immediately struck with her countenance; with its calm, peaceful expression. The refinement of a devout Italian of the lower orders, is different from any other kind of refinement, except perhaps what is sometimes seen in the Irish poor. There is a grace and sweetness about it quite distinct from what education or natural amiability produces; something of poetry mixes with it, and yet it is perfectly simple. It helps us to picture to ourselves the fishermen of Galilee, and even the holy home of Nazareth.

Mariana saluted Edgar with a kind smile, and then turning to Ita, she said, "I was speaking just now, Signora, of what our

Lord has done for you, and I speak to Him every day of what you do for me."

"Oh, it has been so very, very little, but the lady you are going to see will make you much happier than I can."

"Will she? I am quite happy as I am. I suppose she cannot tell me anything about my child?" As she said these words there was a wistful look at Ita, who turned away to avoid answering. "I thought that when Pré Gian took down in writing all I could remember about the loss of my Lucia, and the English lady and gentleman on board the ship, and sent the paper to England, I might perhaps hear something about her. But nothing came of it, Pazienza! God's will be done."

Ita consulted her husband by a hurried glance, but he shook his head, implying that they must leave it to Annie to bring about the disclosure in her own way. The sound of the crutches on the hall floor gave warning to poor Annie that her mother had entered the house. Edgar opened the door of the drawing-room, and said: "She is here, Annie."

"Let her come in," she answered, very calmly, and the mother saw her child again after twenty-three years' absence, and knew her not.

"You are ill, Signora?" she said, as she stood near the couch, looking compassionately on the pale, thin, young face of the stranger.

"Sit down here," Annie murmured, in Italian, pointing to a chair close to her. She held out her hand to Mariana, who took it, and said:

"But you have the fever, Signorina. What a poor little burning hand this is?"

Annie said in a low voice, "Do you guess anything?"

Suddenly a violent trembling shook Mariana's frame; she fell on her knees, leaning against the arm of the sofa.

"Oh, do not kneel," Annie whispered.

"Let me look! Pray, for the love of God, let me look at your shoulder. They said the mark would always remain." As Mariana gasped out these words, Annie opened her dress and uncovered her shoulder.

"It is there," she said; "though perhaps you can hardly see it."

A faint cry burst from the poor mother, and she pressed her lips upon it with silent ecstasy. "There it is!" she cried; "there it is! O Lucia, mia! O Dio, mio!"

Annie did not speak, but she kept a tight hold of her mother's hand. There was a wonderful power of loving, deep deep down in her heart, but words did not come easily to her help. It did not signify—dreamlike as they were—there was a strange sweetness in the first moments of that meeting. Mariana asked for no explanations—for no further proofs—she never for an instant doubted that Annie was her Lucia, and could not remove her eyes from the pale face of her child. With a sort of reverence she kissed over and over again the hand of her new-found treasure.

"Kiss my lips and my forehead," Annie said in bad Italian, and as Mariana bent over her, she drew her into her arms, laid her head against her breast, and felt like a little child again.

When Edgar and Ita came into the room, Annie looked up with a bright smile. Without letting go Mariana's hand, she

drew Ita close to her and whispered, "I have shown her the mark. She knew it again at once."

From that day a singular life began for that mother and that daughter. They could not bear to be apart; they did not say much to each other, but for hours sat working side by side; and when Annie had rested from the journey, they spent most of their time on the terrace, under the catalpa trees. But one sad discovery Mariana soon made. Every morning she went with Ita to the chapel of Sant' Anna; it had not crossed her mind at first that Annie was not a Catholic. She concluded she was not strong enough to walk there.

When the Angelus rang, Annie closed her eyes, and her mother fancied she was dozing. But soon she began to wonder that she never saw her make the sign of the Cross, or hold a rosary in her hands; and one day, when the Blessed Sacrament was carried by to a sick person, and she, and Ita, and even Edgar knelt as it passed, while Annie remained motionless, not even bowing her head, the truth began to burst on the poor mother; her

grief was intense, but her faith and hope did not waver. It was impossible her child could be a Protestant. She had no distinct notions on the subject of Protestantism. How should she? In some of their morning walks, Ita had tried in vain to explain to her how it came that Edgar went to Mass, and knelt before the Blessed Sacrament, and took off his hat as he passed before an image of the Madonna, and that Annie did none of these things.

"And yet Lucia says they are of the same religion!" she would exclaim, quite puzzled.

"Not of the same religion, exactly, but of the same Church," Ita replied. But this was far beyond poor Mariana's comprehension. Her unsophisticated mind could not master the distinction. But it was as well, perhaps, that she did not understand, and was all unpractised in controversy, and only full of faith, and love, and ardent devotion to our Blessed Lord. For without argument, without knowledge, save that of the gospels, and the lives of the saints, and what she had learned in long hours of patient suffering and

earnest prayer, poor ignorant woman as she was, she won her daughter to the Church. Just as in her childhood, Annie had listened to the old man, who wished to make her a good Christian according to his light, and what he called a good Protestant; so now from her new-found mother's lips she imbibed the Catholic faith.

"O mother!" she wearily exclaimed one day, laying her tired head on her breast, "In England, a poor stupid creature does not know what to believe. There are half-a-dozen religions at least in one church. Some say there is no Blessed Sacrament at all in any church."

"God forgive them," Mariana ejaculated.

"Then some say they have the Blessed Sacrament in the Protestant churches."

"God help them, poor people!"

"And then some teach that people should say the Hail Mary, and some that they ought not, and some that they should say half of it."

"Do not think of what they say, figlia mia. Do what the Holy Church of Christ tells you. She is built on the Rock and the

gates of hell shall never prevail against her."

"Teach me," Annie said, looking into her mother's face as if she had been six years old.

And her mother did teach her, by her words, by her prayers, by her example, by the living daily power of that faith which came to Annie like a revelation to smooth her passage from time to eternity. For her life was not to be long. Strong and healthy as she had once seemed to be, the seeds of disease were in her frame, and she was gradually falling into a decline. A great change had taken place in her appearance. The delicate, transparent look which belongs to consumption, in its less painful forms, had quite transformed her face. The sunshine, the soft skies, the balmy air, Mariana's tenderness, and the superhuman joy she found in the Catholic Church, that spiritual mother she had been so long estranged from, revived, for a while, her strength, and raised her spirits. Those who had known Annie Derwent as the mistress of Holmwood would have wondered at her strange beauty if they could have seen her face on the day of her first communion,

when on her return from St. Anne's Chapel she pressed her mother's arm against her heart and said, "Now I know for sure God has been *here*."

An hour afterwards, whilst resting on the sofa, she asked her, "Mother, what did you do to obtain my conversion?"

"I offered up my life," Mariana answered with simplicity. "I begged of God, if it pleased Him, to take it and give you the faith."

Annie said nothing, but clasped her hands together, and closed her eyes. Her mother saw she was praying by the motion of her lips. In a moment she said, "What you did for me I have done for Edgar, and my prayer, like yours, will be granted, and . . . . dear mother . . . . *my* offering will be accepted."

Poor Mariana! She kissed, without speaking, her child's pale face. It seemed, however, for a short time as if Annie had really rallied, and was recovering her health. In answer to Edgar's eager inquiries, the English doctor who had come from Nice to see her had held out hopes, that if she kept pretty well during the winter, she might go

to England for the summer, and he and Ita made many plans on this subject.

Annie always listened to them cheerfully without saying much herself about it. It was at last decided that they should go to England in January, and after Ita's confinement, which was expected early in the spring, that they should return to Mentone either to travel back with Annie to Holmwood, or to spend some time with her at the Villa. She wished them to go; she thought it right on Ita's account. Perhaps, with her own strong impression that her life would not be long, she liked better to be left to the quiet holy care of her mother, than to witness the grief of one whom she had loved in a different manner.

During the last day before they went, she exerted herself to appear better than she felt. On the eve of his departure, she wished to see Edgar alone.

He sat down by her couch, near the window, overlooking the sea. "Annie . . ." he began, but his voice failed him.

She held out her hand, and said, "Dear Edgar, whatever happens, you must not be

sorry for me. I am very happy now. All is as I wish. I went through a terrible time last autumn—those long weeks after Mrs. Gerald's death . . . . Dear Mrs. Gerald . . . . she loved me very much . . . . that is, she loved Annie Derwent . . . ." A sad smile passed over the face on which Edgar was sorrowfully gazing. "But I want to tell you once more, that since I have known everything I have been quite happy. It would have been a great mistake not to tell me . . . . You have all done the best you could for me, and now I want nothing—nothing more than the mother God has given back to me, and what that poor mother has taught me. Edgar, dear Edgar, I know you cannot care for what a stupid person like me can say, but I want you to know how different everything has been in my soul since I have been a Catholic."

"Dearest Annie, I have never spoken to you about it, but I like to tell you, before I go, that I am glad, really glad, you have found consolation in the Roman Catholic communion. You had never been able to realize Catholic truths in ours, and I thank

God that you have found peace in the Church in which you were baptized."

Annie looked at him wistfully, and then held out her hand to him. "God bless you, dearest Edgar," she said, "you know, I am sure, all that that 'God bless you' means. You know what will be my prayer in life, my hope in death."

"Do not talk of death, dear Annie; you are much, much better. We shall meet again in three months."

"It will be as God pleases," she answered. "But *if*—mind, I only say *if*—we should not see each other again, remember my last words."

They parted; and he had then a misgiving that he had been too sanguine as to her recovery. It was too late to change their plans; but, as he took leave of the Abate Giovanni and Ita's friend, the good Shia Teresina, who had become very intimate with him and Mariana, he said, with tears in his eyes, "You will send for me if she should be worse?"

And how did Annie and Ita part? How did those two hearts, which had been so

singularly united and so widely divided, feel in that hour, which one of them, at least, looked upon as a final parting? At first it seemed as if there would be no intimate communication between them even then, nor would there have been, in all probability, if Annie had not felt convinced she was dying. But as it was, from her who had once been the most reserved of the two, there came a burst of feeling which Ita would not have dared to pour forth. A mother's love, her new faith, or, it might be, the approach of death, seemed to have changed her nature. She spoke then—she spoke, at last, as she had never done before.

"Ita, listen to me," she said, throwing her arms round her neck, and drawing her close to herself. "We have been bound together in a very strange way. We have both loved Edgar with a more than common affection, but, thank God, we have never hated one another—have we?"

Ita could only weep on Annie's bosom.

"I was angry with you once. I said cruel words to you when you became a Catholic. Will you forgive me?"

"Oh, Annie! dearest Annie!"

"But I have often blessed you when you did not know it. I blessed you because you made him happy, because you were everything to him I could never have been. And now, oh! now, from the depths of my heart, I bless you more than I ever did before, because you have had the courage to let him suffer—because you have shown him bravely the way, and gone on before, where God is calling him—where he will one day follow you. Ita, we worked together for him those two years at Holmwood . . . ."—here Annie stopped to steady her voice—"to make him happy in this world; now we shall work together . . . . for a higher end, you by his side . . . . I here . . . . or where I shall soon be . . . . where we shall meet again."

"Oh, we shall—we shall meet here, or at Holmwood," Ita exclaimed, sobbing as if her heart would break. "And then, who knows? I may be the one . . . ."

Neither of them could speak again. With one long, tender kiss they took leave of each other.

When from the spot where Mentone is

seen for the last time on the side of Nice, Edgar and Ita looked back on its peaceful loveliness, she threw herself sobbing into his arms. "Oh, darling, darling Edgar!" she murmured, "have I, even I, who love you so much, loved you with such a beautiful, unselfish affection as poor Annie?"

He could not speak. What he felt was not exactly remorse. It had never seemed to him that there had been anything he could have helped in his conduct towards Annie, and yet Edgar Derwent's full and aching heart did not wholly acquit him. He possessed every blessing life can give, but that moment he almost envied the companion of his childhood, the true and devoted heart that had lived for him alone. He thought of the words of Scripture—"It is more blessed to give than to receive."

That last glimpse of Mentone from the height above Capo Martino! How many eyes have fixed themselves upon it with yearning tenderness! How many hearts have gone thence on their way, bearing with them an endless sorrow! How many a young life, full of sweetness and promise, has ended in

that spot which looks so bright and smiling! Some passing away to another world, like angels not meant for earth; some sadly and slowly relinquishing their hold of fleeting pleasures; some in the fulness of faith, some in the darkness of unbelief; some neglected and alone, some cherished to the last with passionate affection, and leaving behind them sweet memories enduring to the end!

O Thou who hast made the beautiful world for man, and on some chosen lands hast poured forth healing treasures and the full riches of nature's wealth, painting the sea and sky with hues the hand of man cannot imitate, moulding each mountain and hill with matchless grace, and clothing them with living gems!

O God, give to these thy works, to these scenes of more than common loveliness, a more than common power to raise the soul from the shadow to the reality, from the creature to the Creator! Let thy olive groves speak of Gethsemane to the sufferer seeking their noonday shade. To the sleepless ear let the unceasing roll of the sea murmur

thoughts of eternity, and the Southern Alps, from their lofty summits, cry out, "Excelsior" to the wayfarer below!

A blessing on thy soft breezes—on thy groves, and on thy shore! On the hopes, the sorrows, and the joys that rise, linger, and live amidst thy sunny mounts, fair, bright, yet sad little city of the South!

* * * * * *

Holmwood, without Annie, seemed a strange place to Edgar Derwent; stranger still was it to take possession of that house as his own—that place where she had spent her whole childhood and youth, and which she might never see again! Neither he nor Ita felt any gladness as they drove up to the old house. The drawing-room looked so exactly as it used to do. It seemed as if Mrs. Gerald and Annie must be about to open the door and come in. The time of the year put them more in mind of the past than the summer had done. The lighted fires—the candles—the arm-chairs round the fire-place. It was all more like old days, than had been the weeks between their return from abroad and their last departure.

"Are there any letters?" Ita asked, as she went up to one of the tables.

"That telegram came this morning," the butler said.

Edgar seized and tore it open. His face changed. But, afraid of startling his wife, he said nothing, and walked towards the fireplace with his back turned to her.

But she guessed what the news was, and followed him. He put the paper into her hands, and burst into tears. The message was as follows :—

"Lucia Adorno e morta aggi alle otte. Requiescat in pace. La povera sua pregundo fur loro. Madre ve ne manda la notizia."

"Annie, Annie!" Edgar exclaimed. "She was as an only sister to me. I would rather never have seen this place again than received this news!"

He felt this then, and he thought he should always feel it; but it is only the sorrows that change the whole aspect of our lives which leave ineffaceable traces. And even those, with a few exceptions, are healed

by time. New hopes, new interests, new affections, in some cases, take the place of the old ones; whilst in others, grief changes its nature and becomes something sacred and holy—a part of our religion, a part of ourselves. In future years Edgar Derwent will, indeed, never forget the young girl who, after joyfully surrendering her wealth, her position, and the name she had so long borne, to one who, but for her, would never have been his wife, and to whom she had already yielded the place in his heart she had once hoped was her own, had died in the morning of her days, blessing him, and praying for him. He will sometimes sigh as he drives his wife and children in the pony-chaise, which was one of her last gifts to him when she was rich and he was poor, or walks by the Vicarage garden where she had planted so many flowers. That strong, patient, unrequited affection will remain in his memory almost at times as a reproach; but life is life, and love is love, and Edgar is like other men. He has a wife whom he worships; a child he dotes upon. He has Holmwood, which he delights in, and is proud of. He has the

means of making others happy, and friends will gather round him, and business will press upon him. And there will be less and less room in his mind for tender thoughts of Annie. Her mother, on the contrary, will mourn for her till her dying day. The memory of her child will be enshrined in her heart as in a sanctuary. Her life had been for many a year one long prayer. Till her daughter was found, that prayer had been a cry for help. Afterwards, it became a hymn of thanksgiving, and, even after her death, a song of praise. For she had been lost, and had been found. She had been snatched from the fold, and restored to it. Day by day, Mariana said, "Magnificat anima mea Dominum, et exultavit spiritus meus in Deo salutari meo."

"Has Edgar Derwent become a Catholic?"

This was the question that Mr. Neville had put to his sister, in a letter which he wrote to her, some time after Annie's death, from the Noviciate of the Passionist Fathers, near Dublin, which he had lately entered.

Mrs. Sydney answered, "No, Edgar is not yet a Catholic. He is greatly changed

since the days when he thought of parting with his wife on account of her conversion. He no longer avoids our society, and stays often with us. He has invited the Rolands and their children to spend several weeks at Holmwood. He has ceased blaming those who feel it their duty to leave the Church of England. He thinks the successive decisions of the Privy Council justify some hesitation in adhering to her Communion, and speaks gently of converts. He is a kind and active landlord, and assists with great charity the poor on his estates. What has given us great pleasure is his helping Ita to build a little school at ——, for the Roman Catholic children. He sometimes does duty in the church at Bramblemoor for the clergyman, who has bad health and is often absent, but not, I believe, at Holmwood. I often wish you could see their baby, the new Annie Derwent. She is such a pretty, attractive little child. Her birth would have been an unmitigated happiness to her parents if it had not brought forward in a painful manner the difference of religion still existing between them. Ita had almost hoped that being a

girl he would have allowed her to be baptized a Catholic. But this was perhaps too much to expect at present, and though it grieved him, I think, to refuse her request, little Annie was christened at the parish church. Poor Ita felt it very much, but she hopes and prays on. One day, some time ago, he found her writing some lines, which he asked to see. They were a simple expression in verse of the strongest feelings of her soul. I have copied them out for you :—

'O Mother Church! my spirit's home,
Long sought and found at last!
Safe in the shelter of thy arms
I muse upon the past.
E'en in my childhood's days arose
A vision of thy form,
And through the thoughtlessness of youth
It showed amidst the storm.

'Like angel visits came those gleams
My startled soul before,
Wave upon wave advancing left
A token on the shore.
Not e'en an adversary's art
Thy lineaments could hide,
And though disfigured by a foe
Thy beauty I descried.

'For thy deep love my bosom yearned,
But trembled at thy creed,
And while it longed to pluck the flower
Refused to sow the seed.
"Oh that thy creed were sound," I cried,
Until I owned its power;
And almost prayed to find it false
In the last solemn hour.

'Great was the struggle, fierce the strife,
But wonderful the gain;
And not one trial, not one pang,
Was sent or felt in vain.
For every link of the long chain
That led my soul to Thee,
Remains a monument of all
Thy love has done for me.'"

"You have never regretted having left us?" Edgar said, with a melancholy smile, as he finished reading these lines.

The eloquent look she gave him would have been answer enough, but she clasped her hands, and said: "If you could only but know what it is to be a Catholic!"

"A Roman Catholic?"

"Very well, so be it—a Roman Catholic. If you did but know what I now know by experience, there would be nothing left for me to wish on earth!"

"God would then be obliged to send us

other trials," he said with another sad smile.

"Yes; I think He would," she firmly answered. "I have often thought that there have been few, very few, if any cases of conversion to the Roman Catholic Church in these past years which have not been followed by some great trial. The Cross has been visibly, I think, laid on those who have cast in their lot with her. Loss of fortune and position, failure in careers and professions, the unkindness of friends or sorrows straight from the hand of God, bereavements, bad health. . . . . Yes, when I look upon our present position, so blessed with all the world can give, it has struck me that if the one great drawback to our happiness was removed, other sorrows would come . . . ." The thought of her husband's sight, always more or less threatened, brought tears to her eyes. "But even if we knew for sure this was to be, if an angel were to reveal it to us, it would not stop us, Edgar, would it; you from doing God's will if once you saw what it was, or I from praying for it, even though my own life should be the price?"

Her eyes were raised to the skies with one of those ardent supplications which seem sometimes as if they would take heaven by storm. Edgar was much affected, but the time was not yet come for surrender.

On the anniversary of Annie's death, a Requiem Mass was sung in the chapel at Grantley Manor. To Ita's surprise, he said he meant to go there with her; for though he sometimes went and prayed before the Blessed Sacrament when he was staying in the house, he had never attended in England any Catholic service. When Mass was over that day, he remained nearly an hour alone in very earnest prayer.

When he came out of the chapel he found Ita waiting for him outside in the garden. He went up to her, drew her arm in his, and for a few minutes they walked up and down without speaking. At last he said: "That dear soul gave me my wife—my greatest earthly treasure. Then she gave us Holmwood, and now I am sure it is her prayers which have obtained for me this last, this highest gift—the gift of faith! I have held back so long; it seemed as if I could not

believe, could not see the truth clearly enough. But just now, during the Mass—this Mass said for her—the words came into my mind, 'I will arise and go to my Father's house,' and every doubt seemed to vanish."

By the following Sunday Ita's husband was a Catholic. As they stood together that day on the steps of their ancestral home, she said to him: "I feel as if Annie had been our guardian angel on earth and in heaven."

THE END.

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